



A beginner's guide to
family history research

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

The first thing to do is to collect all the information you have, contacting family members (not just the older ones) for any information they have. In particular you need birth, death and marriage certificates; photographs (try to find out who the people are and write their names on the back of the photograph); grave deeds, military records, but anything at all concerning the family might well be useful to ensure you are on the right lines.

Next fill in a pedigree chart (available online or from a family history group). You are on the left-hand side, dad is at the top of the second column, mum (maiden name) underneath. Then on to both sets of grandparents, keeping the male line above the female line. If you hold birth, marriage and/or death certificates, draw a line under the date of the event, thus showing which certificates you may need to purchase. When there is something you don't know e.g. your grandparents' wedding, you will know where you need to start your search.

CIVIL REGISTRATION

Civil Registration started in England and Wales on 1st July 1837 (Scotland 1855, Ireland 1863). From that date, everyone should have a birth, death or marriage certificate.

It may not be necessary to purchase all relevant certificates, but it is worth investing in some in order to make sure your research is correct and in order to get further back.

BIRTH CERTIFICATES

They give the date and place of birth (a time of birth indicates a multiple birth), the name and gender of the child, the name and occupation of the father, the name and former name(s) of the mother and the date of registration. Registration of the birth should be within 42 days but where a family forgot, they may "manufacture" a date of birth in order to avoid a fine.

A line where the father's name should be indicates an illegitimate birth. Where there is a birth to an unmarried couple, if both parents attend the Register Office, both names can be shown on the certificate.

Purchase of a birth certificate may be necessary if the mother's maiden name is not known.

MARRIAGE CERTIFICATES

This records the date and place of the marriage; the names, addresses, occupations and ages of the two parties; whether single, widowed or divorced; the names, occupations of both fathers and if they are deceased.

Unfortunately, the certificate will not indicate where the father is living and also many certificates state "full age" rather than an actual age of the parties.

There will be the names of two witnesses and whether the marriage has taken place after banns or by licence.

DEATH CERTIFICATES

Not perhaps as useful as the other certificates, a death certificate is the only way of finding out the cause of death. The death certificate gives the name and age of the deceased, the date and place of death, and the name of the informant. Where there has been a violent, sudden or suspicious death the coroner might be the informant.

It should be noted that the informant might not know the exact age of the deceased person and the death may have taken place away from the person's usual home e.g. hospital, workhouse, relative's house.

How to access certificates:

- Through a local registrar. An application form needs to be completed and payment made before the registrar will institute a search for the certificate
- Through the national index. Each registrar sends details of the birth, death and marriage registration to the General Register Office and they are then indexed by quarter and year
- It is a good idea to have the quarter in which the event took place before applying for a certificate
- Online. The national indexes for England and Wales can be found in local repositories (St. Catherine's House index) or online – subscription sites e.g. Ancestry or Find my Past. There are also sites for searching free of charge e.g. free bmd, Lancashire bmd, freereg To access the national index and order a copy certificate on line go to www.gro.gov.uk

CENSUS

From your pedigree chart, you will need to ascertain which family members will appear on census returns. There has been a national census every ten years since

1801, but 1801/1811/1821 and 1831 do not give much information, so the first useful census is 1841.

There was no census taken in 1941 and the returns for 1931 were destroyed. Information from census returns are subject to a 100 year closure rule. Therefore, the latest census available for research is:

1911

This census, unlike any of the others, consists of the original schedule completed by householders rather than Census Enumerators, thus you can see the handwriting of the householder (or that of the best writer in the family). This census asked for the number of years a couple had been married, how many children living and how many dead. All census material gives the address of the household with the householder as "head" and all the other occupants as their relationship to that head e.g. wife, son, lodger, sister-in-law. Sometimes "in law" relationships are described as "step"

1901

This census is similar to earlier ones except "working at home" is shown.

1891

Again this census follows earlier ones, but with additional information on number of rooms occupied and whether each adult was an employer, employed or unemployed. The question on disabilities was extended to include idiots.

1851-1881

The census of 1851 is the first in the recognised format and this was followed until the 1881 census. Ages had to be precise (but be prepared for inaccuracy). Where there was a baby in the house, the age should be recorded in hours, days or months. The town and county of each person's birth was required but unfortunately just the country of birth is given if a person was born in Scotland, Ireland or abroad.

Information on disability was added from 1851 e.g. blind, deaf or dumb and from 1871 whether an imbecile or lunatic.

1841

This census records each person in a household but not their relationship to the head. Obviously, a man and women with similar ages are probably man and wife but not necessarily, they could be brother and sister. Each person's name and occupation (often abbreviated to MS male servant etc) are given but only a rough idea as to "whether born in this county" with a Yes or No answer. S for Scotland, I for Ireland, F for Foreign Parts.

Ages of children up to 15 should be exact but the ages of anyone over 15 years are rounded down to the nearest five years, so an age of 40 could indicate a person between 40 and 44 years.

How to access census material:

- Local libraries have all census material for their own area and most have a facility for searching census through the library version of Ancestry and/or Find my Past
- The 1881 census was indexed and published in the 1980s by the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. It can be accessed online www.familysearch.org

BURIALS

It is not always easy to find the resting places of ancestors because it is up to the family to make a decision on where to bury a family member and each burial is within the records of that place. Nevertheless, people are buried with members of their family which could give just the right clue as to a way forward.

Up to 1855, everyone had to be buried in local churchyards either near to their homes or wherever they died (each parish had to bury someone who died in their parish). By the early 1850s though, because people were moving into urban areas from rural areas, town graveyards had become overcrowded, with not much accommodation for more funerals.

In 1855 therefore, legislation brought about the inception of burial authorities so applications for that could be made. There are indeed private burial grounds but for the most part, local authorities applied to become the local burial authority. There is a particularly good chance therefore that any funeral after the mid 1850s would be in a cemetery. Each burial authority has to keep excellent records of each interment. Details of the burial authority for each area can be made either online or by contacting local libraries. The burial authority will give details of a burial if some information on when and where it took place.

In the mid-1950's, cremation became more popular because it was cheaper and felt to be cleaner than burials so again if a death took place after say 1955, the chances are that cremation took place. Records of cremation are usually held on the burial authority's computer but because the deceased are not lying with members of their family, the details of a cremation should perhaps be used for completeness of the researcher's records rather than for further research purposes.

The commercial site deceased online is being extended all the time, so details of a burial might well appear.

PROBATE

If there has been a death in the family, care should be taken to search for a will. It might be thought that someone from an ordinary family would not make a will, but it is easy to research probate and the vast majority of wills will be useful to the family historian, even if it is to compare the handwriting from the will to another document to make sure of the correct person.

After 12th January 1858, all wills have been proved by the state, and that situation remains. The Annual Calendar of each will proved in 1858 and each successive year gives: the name, address, marital status and occupation of the testator; the date of death; the names of executors; the date the will was proved; the worth of estate left and the net worth after debts. The Annual Calendar is for wills proved and it can be that the death took place some time before the will was proved so extend your search. The Calendar is of all wills proved throughout England and Wales, in alphabetical order of testator.

Where there is no will but where there are significant goods, someone in the family has to apply for Letters of Administration, which, when granted, authorises the person to dispose of the deceased's goods. Letters of Administration 1858-1870 are indexed separately but after 1870 are indexed with wills, saying "administration".

Wills proved prior to 1858 were proved by ecclesiastical courts and are more difficult to find but are well worth the effort.

How to access a will:

- The Annual Calendar of Wills on microfilm is held in many local repositories.
- Ancestry has the Calendar from 1861-1941, although some years are missing.
- www.gov.uk/search-will-probate was set up in 2014. An account has to be opened after which there will be an option of Wills and Probate 1996-present, Wills and Probate 1858-1996 or Soldiers' Wills.
- You can order a will using the above site, or application can be made to the Leeds District Probate Registry Office (easy to find online)

PARISH REGISTERS

Parish Registers of baptisms, marriages and burials started in 1538 by order of Henry VIII's Vicar General. Survival rates are better from 1598 when it was ordered that records should be kept on vellum.

They are current now, so if you know which church ancestors used for worship, application to the incumbent of that church might give access to

records of events. However, parish registers over 100 years old should be deposited at either a County Record Office or Diocesan Registry. Each county in England and Wales has one or more Record Offices (details online).

Even though certificates should be available for everyone born, married or died from 1st July 1837, it is estimated that 10-15% of births were never registered, it being the responsibility of local registrars to ensure that children were registered. In 1875, it became parental responsibility for registration of their children and there was a fine, so the majority of births were registered after that. So reference might have to be made to parish registers even if a birth took place after 1837.

More recently, the subscription site Ancestry has made facsimile copies of baptism, marriage and burial registers available. Also www.familysearch.org, although relating more to baptisms and marriages before 1837, is worth checking.

Once the above sources have been thoroughly explored, research up to 1837 should be virtually complete but the following are also worthy of consideration:

THE 1939 REGISTER

On 3rd September 1939, on the outbreak of World War 2, the authorities quickly gathered data on all persons living in England and Wales, with the purpose (amongst others) of the issuing of ration books. As people could not eat without a ration book, they naturally gave the required information, which was address, name, occupation, date of birth.

Even after the war ended, the information was used to note e.g. the married name of a woman. The register is the next best thing to a census, especially as there is no census material for 1941 and 1931. The register can be accessed through Find My Past.

NEWSPAPERS

All newspapers can be useful to the family historian but local ones could perhaps be consulted first. Items in Victorian newspapers in particular are very detailed. Relatively small towns had a newspaper and as local life was generally less eventual than today, minor events can be reported in detail.

Newspapers tend to have the same format through the years so a researcher will very quickly identify that portion where births, marriages and deaths are reported (usually with very little detail of say, where a funeral might be taking place – more modern newspapers have more detail). In the 19th century, newspapers tended to be published once a week but as time went on and more and more people could read, daily newspapers started.

The main uses are for family stories such as weddings or funerals where a list of family members attending, the names of bridesmaids, what the bride wore and so on. If a death certificate or a family story indicates a sudden death, it is well worth searching for a write up of what happened. There seems to be a lot of incidence of nightclothes catching fire, kiddies drowning, fatal accidents at work, railway accidents etc. Inquests usually took place quickly (usually within a week of the death).

If there is a reprobate in the family, check for details of court cases. Up to the 1960s, divorces of local people were reported and lists of proven wills were also published. Fallen soldiers are documented during wartime, sometimes with a picture of the soldier.

The British Newspaper Archive from 1700 to 1950 allows people to access articles in 200 (and counting) newspapers. Searching is free of charge but £6.95 must be paid to download copies of articles. Go to www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

TRADE DIRECTORIES

Do not be put off by the name. Although originally lists of local businesses, landowners and so on, by the 1880s the name, address and sometimes occupation of most householders will appear in a trade directory, as no charge was made for individual entries. However local businesses tended to be charged. Some lady householders are listed but not people in digs, those newly arrived in town and people who did not care to be included.

There are many such directories, the Post Office started to get involved in publishing directories after 1800 and Frederic Kelly, James Pigot and then local authorities started to publish their own.

By the late 19th century, specialist directories started to appear – chemists, soapmakers etc. Crockford's Clerical Directory is extremely useful to family historians, as it gives names, addresses and later on, telephone numbers of churches and their incumbents.

As well as all this, directories give information such as the local poor law union; the hundred (which is an administrative unit of land which originally supported one hundred families or 100 fighting men); diocese, history of churches; non-conformist chapels; public institutions, cemeteries, hamlets etc. If someone appeared in a directory for years and then disappeared, this could indicate a death (or a bankruptcy of a company). The directory can be the only record of a long-gone company.

Researchers are strongly advised to consult a directory of the area of interest, especially if it is not well known to them. They are held in local repositories, often on open shelves, but sometimes on microfilm.

The University of Leicester has put directories from their Special Collections onto the internet. Not all directories are included but the site is handy if you are researching away from where you live. The directories cover England and Wales from the 1760s to about 1910, www.historicaldirectories.com

ELECTORAL INFORMATION

From the year 1429, only men in England and Wales aged 21 and over could vote if they held a freehold with an annual rateable value of 40 shillings, although burgesses (men of good standing in the community) and freeman could vote in borough elections.

Voters' lists are published annually and can be viewed at local repositories. There are no lists during the two World Wars as most men were away fighting. The registers show lists of people (before about 1867 alphabetically by ward) eligible to vote and their qualifying address. If someone has moved house within the year, their old and new address can also be listed (house in succession). Parochial registers (Burgess Rolls) list people entitled to vote in parish council elections.

The 1867 Reform Act almost doubled the size of the electorate and all male householders and male lodgers paying at least £10.00 rent a year in urban areas were eligible to vote. The 1884 Reform Act gave the vote to all males paying £10+ rent a year.

After 1918 women over 30 could vote if they were a member or married to a member of the Local Government Register, a property owner or a university graduate voting in a university constituency. In 1928, the voting age became 21 for both men and women. 1969 saw the vote for 18 year olds.

MAPS

Most local repositories have maps of their area. There were great swathes of Ordnance Survey about 1840 and again in 1890 so these are a good point to start with. If you pinpoint an address where an ancestor lived, you will see what sort of property is involved (back-to-back terraces and houses in small courts dotted around as opposed to grand mansions). From the map you will quickly identify local churches (usually where your ancestors worshipped, christened their children, buried their dead and where daughters were married), non-conformist chapels, workplaces. Schools etc. Photocopies of portions of the maps can be purchased. Comparison of the earlier survey and the later one will show how towns, formerly with "wide open spaces" where people farmed, changed to the urban sprawl of a factory town.

This booklet has been produced by the
BOLTON FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY

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