

First steps in family history

Your questions answered

Q Where do I start?

A Start with yourself, add your family, your parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc., in fact, any relatives you can remember. Question older relatives who can be invaluable in providing knowledge of ancestors you may not know of or have forgotten.

Q I've recorded everything my relatives told me. Where do I go next?

A In England and Wales people have been able to register births, marriages and deaths since 1 July 1837. Certificates of events occurring from this date can be obtained from local Register Offices or you can search the General Register Office (GRO) indexes at The National Archives, Kew, Greater London TW9 4DU. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk. Some libraries and family history societies have copies in microform. There are also online sources.

Q What information can I expect to obtain from a certificate?

A A birth certificate usually names both parents, including the mother's maiden surname. Knowing both parents' full names, you can search the indexes for a reference to their marriage. A marriage certificate usually supplies the names of the fathers of both parties. Simple steps like these can take your line well back into the nineteenth century.

Q But this information only applies to England and Wales. My ancestry is Scottish and Irish. What do I do?

A Civil Registration began in Scotland in 1855 and in Ireland in 1864. Certificates can be obtained from New Register House, Princes Street, Edinburgh EH1 3YT (for Scotland) and from the Registrar General, 8-11 Lombard Street East, Dublin 2 for Ireland. Registrations for Northern Ireland after 1921 are at Oxford House,

49-55 Chichester Street, Belfast BTT 4HL. Before commencing this part of your research, however, you are strongly advised to read the relevant chapter in one of the many books available.



Q I have traced my line back to the mid-1800s, using the GRO indexes. How do I get further back?

A Now, you will be largely dependent on the church (or parish) registers. These registers were introduced in 1537/8 and contain baptisms and burials (as distinct from births and deaths) and, of course, marriages. Although many early registers have been lost over the years, a surprising number still exist.

Q Where do I find parish registers?

A Today, very few registers, other than those which are still in use, are held at churches. Many of the registers have been filmed and copies are widely available; ask at the relevant county record office, local studies library or family history society.

Q I've heard of Bishops' Transcripts, but am not sure what they are.

A In addition to the registers, from 1598 parish priests had to send to their bishop an 'annual return', a copy of the register, known as a Bishops' Transcript. Those that still exist can be very useful in supplying entries omitted from the register or replacing a missing register.

Q I've heard of the IGI, what is this?

A The IGI, or International Genealogical Index, is an index to about 250 million births, baptisms and marriages from around the world. The index is produced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and is available in many libraries, record offices and family history societies, and in the Church's own Family History Centres.

Q To date my family history consists, mainly, of names and dates; how do I find out more about my ancestors?

A A census is taken every ten years and records are available for 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911. They are arranged by county and in address order, not by name, so it is useful to know where your family lived at those times to trace them. The 1841 census does not give relationships and generally answers "yes" or "no" to the born in County question. For 1851-1901, details such as age, occupation and place of birth may be found on these census returns. In addition, the 1911 census gives number of years married, number of children born and the number of children that have died.

Q Where can I search the census returns?

A A complete set for England and Wales is housed at The National Archives, Kew. Additionally, 1841-1901 pertaining to your area may be found at your local record office, library or family history society. Census indexes 1841-1911 are available online from commercial firms and images may be downloaded for a fee. Your local library may have 1841-1901 census images online free of charge, but at present 1911 images are only available on a pay-per-view website.

Q What else can I expect to find out about my family?

A There are countless other sources which you can search, far too many to list here, and you would be well advised to read a book on the subject and to attend a family history class.

Q How do I find out if there are any family history classes in my area?

A Try the Workers' Educational Association and the Local Education Authority, both of whom arrange adult classes. If none is available then ask if classes in this subject can be arranged. Your local family history society may be able to arrange Family History classes or workshops.

Q I don't have time to attend classes. What else do you suggest?

A There are many books on the subject, so ask at your local library. Buy a few Family History magazines and check out their book lists for beginners. Your local county Family History Society, Library or Record Office may run Family History Help Desk sessions, look at their websites. Some societies also publish and sell booklets for beginners, some based on the society's area of operation, others of a more general nature. Type "beginning family history" into a search engine.

Q Should I join a family history society?

A Yes, join your local family history society. Go along to their meetings, join in their activities. You will also find it useful to become a member of those societies covering the areas in which your ancestors once lived.

Q What benefits can I expect for my Membership?

A Most societies produce journals and these will describe local records and history. Their Members might be able to help with particular 'local research' problems, for example by visiting the churchyard to read your grandfather's gravestone for you! Belonging to a family history society will also enable you to contact others who are tracing the same surname that you are, in the area where your ancestor lived.

Q How do I find the contact address of a family history society?

A There is a list of contact addresses, including web and email address available, on <http://www.ffhs.org.uk/>, or a printed list can be requested from The Administrator, Federation of Family History Societies, PO Box 8857, Lutterworth, LE17 9BJ.

Q Supposing there is someone already researching the same family as me, how do I find them?

A Many family history societies publish lists of Members' interests in their journals, as booklets, on CD or online.

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Devon Family History Society
PO Box 9, Exeter, Devon
England EX2 6YP
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