

NOTES FROM FAMILY HISTORY WORKSHOP – 14TH APRIL 2014

Seventeen members attended this workshop to discuss their individual experience of Family History (FH) research.

Process followed

David Dawson (DD) facilitated a process to agree the topics to discuss.

Those suggested were:

- How to get started
- How to make best use of the internet
- What sources to use prior to the census collections
- What sources to use after 1911 when census data is not yet released.

Time allowed discussion of the first two topics only.

Three sub-groups were formed, each containing 5-6 members and with a mix of those who had done some FH research and some who had not. Each group discussed a topic at the same time following a process that allowed each individual to explain:

- What experience they had had and what had been successful
- What had been difficult or what they would do differently next time
- Any useful additional points

Important points were noted during each group discussion for subsequent feedback. DD then drew out those points that were consistent between all groups.

Outcome

Much of the discussion at individual tables involved information exchanged directly between members and is not recorded here. The following points were emphasised and recorded during general discussion of each topic.

Topic 1: Getting Started

1. Use family information – speak to relatives, record all the information accurately – use photos, documents, family bible etc. Don't believe everything they say is completely accurate.
2. Use census data, especially 1881 which is accessible free of charge
3. Use IGI
4. Use Parish records, but these can be patchy
5. Watch for spelling accuracy
6. Cross-correlate data between sources or use original documents
7. Beware transcription errors

Topic 2: Using the Internet

1. Use free websites initially – many sites offer free trial periods. Use these to assess the information on each site and see which might be best for your individual needs and then subscribe.

2. Be prepared to take the time to research thoroughly – it isn't quick and needs patience.
3. Occasionally a Google search on a name can produce unique results, so always worth a try, even as a long-shot. Repeating the search after an interval (say, six months) may give additional results.
4. Some recommended websites are:
 - freebmd
 - cyndislist
 - wishfulthinking
 - genuki
 - familysearch

During the meeting reference was made to a number of documents that had been obtained by DD from internet sources and which could act as additional resource for the group. A list of these is appended, together with some notes made by DD (in preparation for the meeting) about how to get started in FH research.

Conclusions

The meeting closed with the suggestions that:

- A further workshop might be organised to discuss other aspects of FH research
- Those members stimulated to research their own FHs might give short presentations to the Group later in the year outlining progress.

David Dawson
17th April 2014

RESEARCHING FAMILY HISTORIES – GETTING STARTED (*DD notes*)

KEY POINTS

1. Be clear and focussed in your objectives
2. Start with existing family knowledge – documents, photographs, recollections
3. Keep clear and consistent records – negatives as well as positives
4. Be systematic
5. Always check original sources – never make assumptions
6. Don't reinvent the wheel

THE BASICS

1. Understand the terminology
2. Basic information – BMD introduced as legal requirement in 1837 in England (Scotland 1855, Ireland 1864), prior to that parish records
3. Get family information – look for context as well as dates and names
4. Visit archives - local, national, specialist
 - a. Concentrate on one individual at a time
 - b. What info do you want from the archive?
 - c. Check basic name indexes. Work from known facts and go backwards –
 - d. Then use other catalogues and reference works
 - e. Then ask to see original documents
5. The Internet
 - a. Major source of information
 - b. Advice on starting and lots of data
 - c. Many 'generic sites' but also some very specialised (e.g researching one particular name)
 - d. Always consider reliability of the site
 - e. Always check if original data or source is given
 - f. Many archives have their catalogues or indexes on-line. But beware they may be of limited use as only document titles with limited descriptions are given
 - g. Remember copyright laws
6. Specialist help
 - a. Society of Genealogists
 - b. Local Family History Societies
 - c. Family History Centres of the Church of Latter-Day Saints (York)
 - d. Family history fairs
 - e. Professional researchers
7. The wider context
 - a. What do you need to know about the community or organisation in which your ancestor worked?
 - b. What information might be available?

NEXT MOVES

Births, Marriages and Deaths

1. *BMD certificates* – copies should be obtained from General Register Office in Southport. Information on names and residence of family members and occupations may be recorded. Informants of death may also be revealing and indicate new avenues of research. In searching for certificates, consider:
 - a. Index order - usually by surname alphabetically, then by first name

- b. Indexes are separate for B, M and D and each volume covers a quarter of the year. Search adjacent quarters or wider still if doubt about exact dates
- c. Only Registration district is recorded on birth certificates, so you will need to know at least roughly the place of birth
- d. It is easier to work backwards than forwards. If unsure about age, then use information from other sources, e.g. census returns
- e. Take care with common names. There may be more than one individual with the same name and you may need to order several certificates before being confident of the correct one.
- f. Allow for more than one name. Many people were known by names other than their registered one.
- g. Expect some failures. Penalties for non-registration were not introduced until 1875 and there may be gaps before then. Sometimes registration took place overseas or was done by the military (there are separate military registration indexes)
- h. Take one step at a time. Clarify one ancestor before moving to another. Certificates contain no information about siblings, etc.

2. *Parish registers*

Introduced in England & Wales in 1538 and in Scotland in 1555.

May be kept in parish but, more likely in diocesan or county archives.

Remember:

- a. Not a comprehensive record as they were maintained at the discretion of the local vicar.
- b. Readability varies depending on handwriting and preservation. Most are on microfiche. Some areas have printed transcripts but beware human transcription errors!
- c. Most records prior to 1837 do not provide date of birth or death but of baptism or burial
- d. Note that until 1752 the start of the year in England was 25 March so some entries (such as 24 February 1678/9) may indicate both possible dates

3. *International Genealogical Index*

- a. A possible alternative to parish records. Available on-line and prepared by the Church of Latter-Day Saints
- b. World-wide index that includes all parts of the British Isles, usually sub-divided into county or region
- c. Need an idea of family location
- d. May need to travel to the archive – York

4. *Registers for other religions* – RC, Quakers, Muslims, Jews.

Many were deposited with Registrar General when official registration was introduced in 1837 and are in the National Archives. Modern records are likely to be with the relevant organisation or place of worship.

Census Data

The census is an exciting tool because it allows us to see a snapshot of our ancestors: we may see them at home with their families, in a military barracks, at boarding school, visiting friends or relatives, in prison or in all kinds of other places.

We see information such as how each member of each household was related or connected to all the others, how old everybody was, where they were born and what jobs they had. It can be like peering in at the window of our ancestor's home.

The census was taken once every ten years starting in 1801, and returns for 1841-1911 are available online. Only summary statistics are available before then as the detail was not required to be kept – but some earlier returns have been found in a few districts. Returns after 1911 are not yet available to the public. In Ireland, the only available censuses are 1901 and 1911 (see 'Elsewhere on the Web' to locate these tools).

Information provided on the census can be very useful in confirming who is in our family tree, and indeed who is not part of the family. For example, if your ancestor was called John Smith, and you are having trouble distinguishing the correct birth record from the numerous options, the census might just be able to help. For example, if the correct John Smith married in 1882, and gave his address as 18 Church Green, Newquay, on his marriage certificate, then you might be able to find him at this address on the 1881 census. You will then have the names of both of his parents and probably several siblings, too, as well as his place of birth.

If one of the siblings had an unusual name, perhaps Edgar Job Smith, then it is likely there will only be one option in the birth indexes, and it might be more useful for you to order this birth certificate instead of pursuing your search for John's. Alternatively, knowing the names and ages of so many family members from the 1881 census, you might search for the family on the 1871 census, then the 1861, and see where the family was living at around the time John was born. From the location and the names of both parents, as well as the occupation of the father close to the time of John's birth, you may be able to narrow down your options in the birth indexes and be confident when you have the correct certificate.

Wills and Probate

An important insight into family relationships. Remember:

1. Where to obtain copies:
 - a. Before 1858 executor needed to register the will with the relevant ecclesiastical court to obtain a grant of probate – records are now with county archives or diocesan record office. There are separate records for the Prerogatives Courts of Canterbury (at the National Archive) and York (at the Borthwick Institute, York)
 - b. After 1858, a central Court of Probate was established for England & Wales and nowadays wills are registered at the Principal Probate Registry, London
 - c. Scotland has a separate system and records are kept in Edinburgh
 - d. Irish wills are mainly in Dublin with some copies in Belfast, although most wills prior to 1914 have been destroyed
2. If no will was made, letters of administration would be granted to next-of-kin
3. After 1796, death duties were payable and registers often give other details e.g. for next-of-kin
4. When working with wills:
 - a. Use probate copies which may be more legible than originals
 - b. Be flexible about date of death as wills may not be listed in the same year because of delays in granting probate, especially if the will is disputed
 - c. Remember exceptions. You should be able to obtain the names of family members who received bequests in any will, along with their relationship to the person who wrote it. However, important members are sometimes excluded - as may be the case with an heir at law, who would naturally receive the estate without the need for a bequest.

Hence the first born or eldest surviving male may actually be omitted from the will.

- d. Avoid assumptions. Never assume you are receiving all the facts – corroborate findings against other sources

Wider Sources of Information

“Parish Chest” – the 1538 requirement to keep a Parish Register also required ‘one sure coffer with two locks and keys’ be provided in which to keep it. In many parishes this coffer or chest was used to store other things and records may exist relating to the Poor (Poor Laws):

- 1601 Poor Law Act – Churchwardens oversee funds levied by a rate on inhabitants – monthly records to be kept
- 1662 Act of Settlement – every individual officially ‘settled’ in a parish which must provide for them in hard times – settlement decided in variety of ways (birth, apprenticeship, a full year’s work, owning or renting property, etc) – strangers could be removed and any temporary residents had to have a certificate from his own parish agreeing to take him back
- 1697 Settlement Act - ‘paupers’ the responsibility of the home parish – required to be examined by a magistrate and these cases may be recorded in the Quarter Sessions Records
- 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act – moved responsibility from parishes to Unions which grouped parishes and introduced Boards of Guardians of the Poor. Each union provided a workhouse

Other parish records:

- Overseers’ accounts
- Churchwardens’ accounts
- Bastardy allegations, examinations and bonds
- Poor Rate books
- Parish apprenticeships
- Sometimes ministers and parish officials used their registers as unofficial diaries and in rare instances there may be records of local events, gossip or even the weather!

Gravestone and Church inscriptions

- Some local registers – SoG has built up a collection
- May be in local records office or county records

Newspapers

- Look at time of BMD – will illustrate the local news at the time even if no reference to the ancestor
- British Library
- Many now on line

Local directories and gazetteers

- Published from around 1780 – list history and topography with prominent persons and tradesmen. Adverts informative
- Gazetteers may cover a county or country
- *Kelly’s* and *Bartholomew’s* are best known

Tax records

- Land Tax – collected from 1690d but most records 1780-1832 (payment was then a voting requirement). Record owners and tenants
- Hearth Tax 1662-1674
- Window Tax – 1696-1851

Land records

- Owners
- Tenants
- Check estate records for workers listed
- Manorial records too
- Details from The Historical Manuscripts Commission

Court records

Military Records

Maps

- Enclosure award – 1760-1860
- Tithe Maps – 1836-1854
- Estate maps
- County maps, road maps and Ordnance Survey, esp 1st series and reprints of the New Series

LIST OF RESOURCES FOR FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH

Guides to Genealogy websites

- **To Pay or Not to Pay?** A guide to choosing genealogy sites on the Internet. By Jenny Thomas
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/familyhistory/get_started/paying_for_research_01.shtml
- **Free Websites** By The Federation of Family History Societies
http://www.ffhs.org.uk/really_useful_leaflet.pdf
- **Catalogues and Online records.** Front page directory of records available on line from The National Archives and partner agencies
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/catalogues-and-online-records.htm>

When you Get Stuck

- **What's Been Done Before?** By Else Churchill.
- **Localising Your Ancestor** by Else Churchill
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/familyhistory/next_steps/adv_01_localising_01.shtml
- **Using Libraries** by Else Churchill

Researching Across Borders

- **19th Century Immigration** by Else Churchill
- **European Migration** by Dr Nick Barrett

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/familyhistory/next_steps/int_05_europe_01.shtml

- **The British Overseas** By Else Churchill
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/familyhistory/next_steps/int_06_british_overseas_01.shtml
- **Nations and Regions** by Dr Nick Barratt

Military Records

- **Researching Military Records** by Peter Francis
- **Military General Information Gateway**
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/familyhistory/bloodlines/military.shtml>
- **Tracing Military Records** by Peter Craddick Adams
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/familyhistory/military_records/tracing_records_01.shtml

More Specialized Items

- **Directories and Periodicals** by Else Churchill
- **Church Courts** by Else Churchill
- **17th and 18th Century Sources** by Else Churchill
- **Crime** by Dr Nick Barratt
- **Family Secrets** by Dr Nick Barratt
- **Professions** by Dr Nick Barratt
- **Representation** by Dr Nick Barratt

Note:

All the above documents should be accessible by simply clicking on the title itself or on the link given. If there is any problem please let me know.

Also, I have learned today that the cost of subscribing to a site allowing access to UK newspaper archives has just been reduced from £30 to £9.95 per month. It is www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

David Dawson
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