

Family history tracing on the Internet

The first thing many Museum visitors see on entering the main room is a family tree of an important Emsworth fishing family displayed on the left-hand side stand. The time is now past when those who were unable to travel were denied access to researching their own family tree. Today, a great deal can be achieved by using internet access – either at home or the public library.

A huge number of resources are available online – many are free – though the most comprehensive records for British researchers are accessed via Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk) or Findmypast (www.findmypast.co.uk). Each of these services charges fees – either on a pay-as-you-go basis or through an annual subscription. Many public libraries also offer free access to these services. The services also have online guides to help you get started. (At the time of writing, both are offering 14-day free trials and Ancestry is offering free access to the 1911 census).

The two services have slightly different offerings – and these are being added to constantly. They both offer access to census records – which are some of the most useful records for the 19th and early 20th centuries. Generally a researcher would access an indexed transcript before drilling down to the original entries. Some researchers swear by Ancestry, while others favour Findmypast, which is my personal favourite. Professional genealogists are likely to subscribe to both.

Getting Started

Most family historians will begin with whatever knowledge and records their family may have kept. Any family stories need to be treated with some care – as they may have been 'embroidered' over time – though will generally contain some basis in fact. Where they are sketchy, some real detective work will be needed – but that is probably the main fun in discovering family history.

Let's say you have a marriage certificate as a starting point, and that the marriage date was prior to 1950. It will help you go back a generation as the certificate will contain the 'declared' ages of both spouses together with the names of the fathers and their occupations. It will also show the partners' addresses at the date of marriage.

Online services above include access to indexes covering the Registrar General's records of Births, Marriages and Deaths. There is also a free service: www.freebmd.org which was created by volunteers. If you decide to obtain any copies of certificates for your research, remember that the cheapest source is the official General Register Office site for £9.25 (see www.gov.uk/order-copy-birth-death-marriage-certificate).

In all cases, it helps if the surname that you are researching is less common. Smith family lines are more difficult to follow. The other useful factor is a connection with a family village or town over a long period, a particular trade, eg fisherman, innkeeper or boatbuilder or family Christian names which passed down the generations. All these factors can help you to look in the right places and identify likely people when you find them. When looking for births after the third quarter of 1911, the index helpfully contains the mother's maiden name, which could lead back another generation.

Using Census Returns

When looking for entries, local knowledge is invaluable. Failing that, it helps to keep an atlas or place name index to hand – both to assist in interpreting census entries and also in deciding if a particular one might be yours. If you are using the 1841 census, uniquely taken in June of that year, and searching for Emsworth sea-going relatives, it is highly likely that some entries would have been made under their summer seasonal employment on this particular occasion. Two fishermen were listed in the 1861 census (taken, like all the others in April) under 'persons temporarily absent', whilst the Shipping Schedules listed in the 1891 census gives the crews of the *Evolution* and *Osprey* as absent.

Familiarising yourself with local maps is also very useful and can be quite fascinating. A modern atlas or Google maps may provide a start. The large-scale county street atlases are good. On the internet, www.old-maps.co.uk allows you to browse historic maps of your location free and can show you how somewhere looked at a particular time – including tiny hamlets which may no longer exist.

Census transcripts should be treated with care – as they frequently contain errors or omit information present on the original. After finding an entry you think is relevant, always look at the original image. This may reveal that the name in the transcription is incorrect, eg one I found showed MIDOMSON instead of WIDDOWSON. In another case, under occupation was shown 'errant boy' – though the original intention must have been 'errand boy' unless they were remarking on his character.

The writing on the page can often be faint (as some originals used pencil), handwriting may be poor or simply unfamiliar. It does become easier to interpret with practice. There are more problems with the 1911 census where the transcriptions have been made from the original schedules submitted by individual households — containing the handwriting of eight million different people. The good part is that it allows access to the schedules actually signed by your ancestor. See www.1911census.co.uk for more information.

One of the commercial providers had the work carried out in the Philippines and is rumoured to have used prisoners to complete many of the entries – people who may have lacked education and a lot of the local knowledge which helps make things clear (There is an interesting note regarding this as www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/foi/1911-census-transcription.hym). The commercially-prepared indexes tend to contain many obvious errors – though they do invite you to submit corrections where you find mistakes. Where family history society information, which has been produced by local volunteers, is used, it tends to be much more reliable.

Finding Particular Names

You need to be flexible and use a little imagination in your search. If you are looking for a woman who was called 'Mary Ann' look for other variations eg 'Mary A' or simply 'Mary'. While the search engines often have a tick box to 'include variants' this does not always seem to pick up on all of these. If the name is not too common, you can search simply by the surname – particularly where you have a good idea of the county or parish where they were likely to have lived or been born.

Use other names in the household to help narrow down the search (if you know them) eg names of parents and/or siblings. When someone proves elusive you may need to use the information that you have as a check – while widening the net. Look at the likeliest (nearest) parishes/counties and in London (where many people gravitated at one time or another) and work through the possibilities that you find. Once you have found an individual in the census, you can work backwards (sometimes forwards) by calculating approximate ages and date of birth (DOB) from a particular year. It is worth noting that ages in the census (and therefore calculations based upon them) are often incorrect, due to rounding, deliberate misreporting or errors.

Flexibility and the use of intelligent assumptions can be useful here too. Suppose you have found someone in the census for 1851 – yet can't immediately find their entries for other years. First look for variations on the name – both look-alikes and sound-alikes. Bear in mind that the 1841 census entry is unlikely to tell you much information – as it contains no birthplaces — only whether born 'in county' or outside it. You may still want it for general information. However, it may be more useful to first go forward to 1861 and later. This can be especially valuable, since at this time older relatives whose spouses had died often had to come and live with their children. When, for example, a widowed mother becomes part of the household, it provides evidence of another generation – with possibly another birthplace or surname known.

Conclusion

There is a huge amount of family history potentially available online. However, it is always wise to check original records – and not to simply rely upon transcripts. For me, the greatest satisfaction comes from visiting and photographing the places where my ancestors lived. It is also worthwhile consulting records of the local County record Offices (as many are unlikely to have been digitised).

Happy hunting!

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