



# YOUR HISTORY MATTERS

## **Top tips for researching your family history**

### **Work out what you already know**

You probably already know more than you think about your family history. Try to remember all those stories your grandpa used to tell you that you thought were boring at the time – they might contain nuggets of information that will lead you further down the road of discovering your family history.

Look through old family photographs, and check through old papers to see if you've got any copies of birth, marriage or death certificates that could help.

### **Record what you find out**

Make a record of the information you find out. Record what it is, where you found it and when. As you delve deeper, you'll probably find that bits of information contradict each other; what you thought was an indisputable fact may turn out to be just one person's view of what happened. Recording where you found each fact will help you decide which source is the most reliable.

You could also turn your record into a diary of your journey of discovery. Illustrate it with, for example, photographs taken when you visited the church where your grandparents got married. Your record will then tell your descendants something about you, as well as earlier family history.

### **Births, marriages and deaths**

Certificates of births, marriages and deaths are important sources for family history. Births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales have been registered by the state since 1 July 1837. The General Register Office (GRO) gathers the certificates from local registrars, and indexes them according to the date of registration. Deaths and marriages have to be registered quickly by law, but births can be registered up to six weeks after the baby's birth. Bear this in mind if you're searching for births; you may need to search up to six weeks after the birth date. Another potential confusing fact about certificates is that the place shown in the index is the district in which the event was registered, not where the event actually happened.

## **Census returns**

A national census has been taken in England and Wales every ten years since 1801 (except for 1941). It's not until 1841 that the census really starts to be useful for family history, as the first four don't even record names. From here until 1901 the census records the name, age, sex and profession of every member of a household. From 1861 the information is particularly detailed, identifying the head of each household and how others in the household are related to them, and also marital condition and place of birth.

## **Getting access to records**

You can access the GRO indexes in person at the Family Records Centre (see Useful addresses, below), or on microfiche at a range of places including the Society of Genealogists' Library, county record offices and some public libraries. You can also access them through internet sites such as [www.freebmd.org.uk](http://www.freebmd.org.uk). Use the references from the indexes to order the certificates from the GRO. A charge will be levied for the certificates.

You can find census records from 1841 to 1901 online (records are closed for privacy for 100 years so 1901 is the most recent year available). Visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/census](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/census); there is a charge to look at census pages.

## **How to use records to discover your family history**

Finding out your family history can be an exciting and confusing journey, and it can be easy to get sidetracked. Try to start with a known event, for example your mother's birth, and find the documentary evidence for it. Search it out in the GRO index and then order a copy of the certificate itself; you can do this online at [www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates](http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates), or by phone or post from the GRO (see Useful addresses, below).

Use the information on this certificate to trace your history further. So, from your mother's birth certificate, work backwards to your grandparents' marriage certificate. Once you find this, it will probably show your grandparents' age, which will help you track down their birth certificates.

Certificates show the place where the event was registered, and you can use that to search for census entries.

## **What to do when the trail goes cold**

For every family historian, there's a time when you just can't find the information you need. This might be due to a number of reasons. For instance, if you're looking for the registration of a birth but can't find it, the person may have been registered under another name, their surname may

have been spelt differently, or the date you thought was accurate is actually wrong. Don't be discouraged; go back to the last fact for which you have documentary proof, and work forwards from that.

### **Going back further in time**

Though births, marriages and deaths have been recorded by the state in England and Wales since 1837, the records go back much further than that. Parish records (i.e. baptisms, marriages and burials), have been recorded in Church of England parishes since 1538. Most of the records are in county record offices, and the Church of the Latter-day Saints keep an International Genealogical Index, which contains 400 million baptisms and marriages from parish registers between 1538 and 1875 (see Useful addresses, below).

### **Family photographs**

Photography was invented in 1839 and was widespread by 1850, so many of us have Victorian family photographs. Often we don't know who the subjects are, but photos can still reveal clues about our family history.

The first thing to do is work out an approximate date for your photo. Its format is a vital clue here. The main types of photograph are:-

- Daguerrotypes, produced 1841 – around 1855
- Cased collodion positives, 1850s to 1880s
- Ferrotypes, 1870s onwards
- Carte de visite, 1860s – around 1918
- Postcards, around 1900 onwards.

Cartes de visite and postcards are the most common types.

Once you've identified your photo's type, you need to date it. The photographer's name and address can be useful here; the Royal Photographic Society can help (see Useful addresses). Women's costume is another way of dating photographs – consult books on costume history in your local library, or contact your local museum to see whether they can date your photographs from the costume depicted.

Don't forget that your photograph may have been taken to mark a particular occasion. Sometimes this is obvious, for example a wedding, but sometimes you have to look more closely. If a couple are photographed, wearing seemingly ordinary clothes, is the woman's left hand clearly visible? If she's wearing an engagement ring, the photo could have been taken to commemorate their engagement.

Once you've worked out a rough date, and perhaps the reason for the photograph, you can use census returns and parish registers to see whether you can discover the identities of the subjects.

## Personal possessions

Any personal possessions that have been passed down from previous generations can provide useful clues for your search. Here are a few ideas:-

- *Clothes and accessories*, such as hats, can tell you where your ancestors were located. Until the 1930s, most clothes were made either at home or by dressmakers. The latter sewed their labels into their creations. Use trade directories to locate them and find out when they were in business.
- *Medals* sometimes show names and regiments. You can then follow up the regiment's records – the Imperial War Museum and Royal Navy or RAF museums are helpful here.
- *The family bible* is often the place where names and dates of births and christenings are recorded. If you're lucky enough to have one, don't forget that you'll still need to use documentary records to check the accuracy of the entries.

## Useful addresses

- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)
- Family Records Centre [www.familyrecords.gov.uk/frc](http://www.familyrecords.gov.uk/frc)
- General Register Office  
PO Box 2  
Southport  
PR8 2JD  
Tel 0845 603 7788
- Imperial War Museum [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk)
- National Archives [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)
- Royal Photographic Society [www.rps.org](http://www.rps.org)
- Society of Genealogists [www.sog.org.uk](http://www.sog.org.uk)