

THE THIRD AGE TRUST



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

Family History

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HOW TO START A GENEALOGY GROUP

In recent years, many people have become interested in the past, and particularly in the history of their own family. As we get older and have a little more time to spare, we feel the urge to research our roots, but have difficulty in knowing just where to begin. There has, consequently, been considerable demand in U3A to get help to satisfy that urge. A great deal of material, certainly back to the middle of the nineteenth century, is available online and it is possible to get the impression that this is all that is needed, but family history, the true story of our ancestors, who they were, where they lived and what they did needs more extensive research.

Except for our siblings, our family history is unique and so all that we can do is to provide guidelines which each member of our group may follow for themselves. I am often asked if the leader of a Family History group should be an 'expert', but aside from a certain amount of experience in researching their own family, it is impossible for one person to know all the possibilities. There are so many books and magazines available full of help and information that, once started, each member of the group can follow their own line of research.

The logical way to begin research into a family tree is to begin in the present and work backwards in time. I list below the order that seems to have worked for me with my groups, and a summary of the material in each section.

1. Introduction. What we already know, memories, photographs, cards, letters and other bits and pieces from the past. Information from relatives. Documents, particularly any that give information about the names, birth, christening, marriage, death or burial dates or the places where ancestors lived. These particular details provide the factual framework on which a family history is built. It is useful if you can provide a 'Record of ancestry', or some other sort of chart that your members can use to record the names of their parents and grandparents, etc. as far back as they know, so that they can sort out the generations and see what they need to find out first.
2. Birth, Marriage and Death Certificates. Since 1837, Registrars have issued these certificates, all of which give essential details of names, dates and places. The Indexes of these documents can be found online at freebmd.org.uk or through ancestry.com and other (pay) websites. They can also be found in microfilm form at some local offices, Mormon centres etc. They are only indexes and a certain amount of detective ability is required to find the names you are looking for. The website gives instructions how to order certificates at £7.50 each.
The Scottish system is different as it is possible to view all the details on certificates before paying for copies.
3. The Censuses 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901. All the Censuses are now on the Internet, fully indexed, principally on ancestry.com. The censuses give a fascinating snapshot of all our families on a particular date, with essential information about their age, people in their household, their occupation and place of birth.

4. Prior to 1837, we are dependant on the information about Baptisms, Marriages and Burials recorded, since the 16th century in some cases, by the local parish church where these events were celebrated. The Parish Registers continue to be used, but with the decline in church going and the greater accuracy of the Registration process, they are less useful since 1837. The Parish Registers were collected and are held in County Record Offices, which have a duty to preserve them. A great deal of the information from the Registers has been microfilmed by the Mormon church and is available in the International Genealogical Index (I.G.I) which can be found as Microfiches in libraries, and on the Internet as familysearch Family History Societies, mostly County based, often produce Microfiche or CD-ROMs of Parish records, as do commercial firms. An increasing number of counties are putting their parish records on the Internet, but the coverage is nowhere near complete.
5. Recording. It is useful to have a session on what to do with the information researched. All information must be carefully kept, along with noting where it was found and on what document. It is also useful to record documents examined, but where nothing was found. The form this record should take is an individual choice. It is possible to use a computer program, which will enable inclusion of photographs and scans of documents, or it can be on paper in the form of family trees and lists of information or as a card index.
6. Wills. Although not every one found it necessary in the past to make a Will, perhaps having little to leave, they are interesting documents and can show relationships and, if an inventory is included, can tell a lot about how the family lived.
7. The National Archive/ Public Record Office. A fantastic collection of national, (as against local) records, from 1066 to the present. Especially useful to family historians who have Servicemen among their ancestors, or criminals or immigrants.
8. Other sources: Local and national newspapers, Directories, the Society of Genealogists, Mormon Family History Centres, museums, Family History Societies, magazines and Local History centres.
9. Social History: Poor laws and Workhouses, the industrial revolution and the movement of population, crime and transportation, immigration and emigration.

Further meetings can be arranged for trips to the National Archive/Public Record Office (if not too far away), County Record Offices and museums and other places of interest locally or to invite speakers.

A single day's outing to London is not long enough to do a great deal of research, but many members are reluctant to make their first visit on their own and the trip gives them the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the layout and what is available.

This should cover sufficient ground to enable members to start their research in England and Wales. Scotland has its own depositories of Public and Parochial Registers in Edinburgh, and Ireland has its own problem as many of their documents were destroyed in a fire in 1922. Both follow roughly the same pattern as England and Wales.

USEFUL BOOKS

How to trace your family history on the internet. Reader's Digest. Hardback £30, although it had been offered more cheaply and with a subscription to a magazine.

Comprehensive and wide-ranging, informative and user-friendly, with pictures, lists of addresses, easy to understand and well laid out. The best one I know!

Ancestral Trails. Mark D. Herber. Society of Genealogists.

A heavier and more scholarly volume with everything you could possibly need to know. Besides the massive amount of information, the author refers you to other books, addresses and PRO leaflets, all illustrated with his own family tree. Invaluable for reference.

The Dictionary of Genealogy. Terrick V.H. Fitzhugh. A. & C. Black

A very useful reference book to explain terms that occur, as well as clarifying briefly the function of research centres and documents. Revised by Susan Lomas.

The Family and Local History Handbook. Robert Blatchford. Published annually. £9.99.

A comprehensive listing of addresses of all the places you may need to contact or visit, plus some very interesting articles on many facets of Family and Local History.

The Genealogist's Internet. Peter Christian. Public Record Office.

All you need to know about using the Internet and listings of websites for information, connecting with others on the same track, official records and contacting groups.

The Phillimore Atlas and Index of Paish registers. Cecil Humphrey-Smith £50

One to look for in your local library. A collection of maps of every (old) county in England, Wales and Scotland with all the parishes, and a listing of the parishes showing what registers have survived, with dates, where they can be seen and what other indexes they appear on.

The Genealogical Research Directory Johnson & Saintry Published annually. About £20. May be in the Public Library.

A listing of surnames, sent in from many countries, which may enable readers to find lost relatives. Check names that interest you, along with the places and dates and find the name and address of someone who is also interested.

This is by no means comprehensive, (I have a whole bookcase full of Family History books), but will be more than sufficient to get started.

DVD

The U3A Resource Centre has several videos and DVDs which can be borrowed and may make a good basis for learning about Family History. My own favourite is 'Discover your Family History' produced by the Society of Genealogists.

USEFUL WEBSITES

I have compiled this list with assistance from my group in Salisbury U3A. New Websites are appearing all the time; the magazines (below) print reviews in every issue. Many websites are produced mainly for America, others tell where information can be found.

www.familysearch.org This is a major site set up by the Church of the Latter Day Saints, the Mormons, which includes the information from the I.G.I., Ancestral Search and the 1881 Census.

www.census.pro.gov.uk The site for the 1901 census. Name and address searches are free, but it costs to see more detail.

www.genuki.org.uk A reference library of primary historical resources

www.freebmd.org.uk A UK site dedicated to providing free access to the GRO index for England and Wales from 1837. Enough information to enable you to send to Stockport for a certificate. Incomplete at present, but being added to all the time.

www.englishorigins.com A paying site set up by the Society of Genealogists and Origins.net. A name search between 1442 and 1850 from various sources, including Boyd's Marriage Index.

www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk and www.scotsroots.com Two sites for Scottish ancestral information. Both ask for fees.

www.cyndilist.com A comprehensive list of genealogy links.

www.genesconnected.co.uk Add your family history details to this nationwide online database and share information with other members. An offshoot of Friends Re-united.

www.ancestry.co.uk All English censuses from 1841 – 1901 This site requires a subscription, but there are free offers in magazines from time to time and some libraries offer the opportunity for free access.

MAGAZINES

Family Tree Magazine. Monthly

The longest established and full of interesting articles. Readers' Interest section to contact others researching the same family and 18th Century Links, items sent in by readers, again to help make contacts.

Practical Family History (Monthly)

Sister to the above and intended more for beginners. Readers' Interests and 'My Great Grand Parents were...' for contacts. A very good section on getting information from old photographs.

Family History Monthly (Monthly)

A very varied range of articles, featuring a different county each month. Readers' Interests and coats of arms

Ancestors published by the National Archive/PRO (Monthly)

The articles mostly concern material held by TNA/PRO and cover ground not found in the other magazines. Interesting, and very well illustrated..

Your Family Tree (Monthly)

The most expensive. However every month it includes a CD-Rom with trials of computer programs or listings from directories among other items. It is very computer orientated and many articles show information about websites, how to access them and how to use them. There are other articles particularly about beginning family history research, also features on different counties and local surnames.

Who do you think you are? (BBC, Monthly)

This magazine follows the BBC programmes and gives more details of the cases investigated on the programme and also has a good variety of other interesting articles. It is colourful and well laid out and is accompanied by a CD-ROM or CD every month, many giving information from a UK county.

All these can be found in main newsagents. They all have experts answering queries, computer sections, listings of new CD-ROMs, and websites, reviews of new books and information about current events and Family History Fairs.

My advice to my Group is that they should look at the magazines on sale and flick through them to see if there is anything that is of particular interest to them, rather than subscribing. I subscribe myself to several, and they can borrow my copy.

As I have mentioned, no leader of a Family History group can hope to know everything that their members will want to know. Many leaders, although quite happy to organise a venue and dates and times for the group to meet, are not happy to find themselves 'tutoring' the group with full responsibility to look up all the information for every meeting. It is possible to shed the load; I suggest two possibilities. First, to obtain a good Family History book and to hand it to members, (or even a small group of friends) in rotation, so that they can prepare a presentation on the next subject to be covered. Secondly, to ask every member to get for themselves a book on Family History, (there are some very low-priced books about, or the Library may be able to help). At each meeting, announce the subject of the next meeting and ask everyone to read all they can about it. At the meeting get everyone to contribute something they have found out.

I have held my meetings at fortnightly intervals, which enables everyone to prepare for the next meeting. I intersperse my formal subject meetings with 'Informal' ones

occasionally to which anyone interested is invited, which gives opportunity for discussion between beginners and those more experienced. They can also consult my pretty extensive collection of books. All our meetings finish with coffee and chat.

To assist members who would have difficulty in travelling to County Record Offices or other sources of information in distant parts of the country, the U3A Subject Network for Genealogy can offer some assistance. The Network, primarily set up to help U3A members to set up and run Family History Groups, issues a Newsletter at irregular intervals, which offers suggestions to help group leaders and will pass on requests for assistance from any member for a limited amount of research in another part of the country. For further information or to join the network, please contact:-

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8, Shakespeare Road,
Stratford-sub-Castle,
Salisbury SP1 3LA

It may be helpful to photocopy the following list and hand it out to the members of the Group for their own reference.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION FOR FAMILY HISTORY

1. Yourself and your own memories.
2. Relatives.
3. Documents, photographs, letters, post cards, baptismal certificates, school reports, Family Bibles, address books, birthday books, newspaper cuttings.
4. *freeBMD* for indexes to find certificates of birth, marriage and death. New Register House, Edinburgh for Scotland.
5. Local Register Offices for certificates as in 4 above, but only for their own area.
6. *ancestry.com* to consult the Censuses of 1841,1851,1861,1871, 1881, 1891 & 1901 for the whole of England and Wales and Scotland. Scottish Census records are at New Register House, Edinburgh.
7. County Record Offices, usually in the County Town, hold the Parish Registers of most of the parishes in the county. These contain records of the baptisms, marriages and burials in the parish from as early as 1538 to the present. They hold many other documents, maps, wills and directories of local interest.
8. The International Genealogical Index (I.G.I.) is made up of material researched by the Mormons covering most of the world. The sections covering the UK can be consulted in libraries, LDS Family History Centres and on the Family Search website. It includes baptisms and marriages from Parish Records and from other sources. It is incomplete and has some inaccuracies, but is a very useful resource.
9. Family History Centres attached to some LDS Churches hold the I.G.I. and some census records, and can obtain copies of microfiches of Parish Records from their Library in Salt Lake City on request.
10. The Society of Genealogists - 14, *Charterhouse Buildings, Goswell Road, London EC1M 7BA* - has a library with an enormous amount of genealogical information including microfiches and microfilms of parish registers, the Boyd Marriage Index and family trees lodged by members. It is possible to join the Society, or pay an hourly or daily rate to use the library.
11. The British Library Newspaper Library, Colindale Avenue, The Hyde, London NW9 5HE has the most comprehensive collection of local and national newspapers, which can be consulted.
12. The Principal Registry of the Family Division, Probate Department. First Avenue House, 42-29 High Holborn, London WC1V 6NP has all the Wills and Administrations probated since 1858. Earlier Wills can be found at the Family Records Centre or at County Record Offices.

13. The National Archive/Public Record Office (TNA) Kew, Richmond, Surrey. TW9 4DU has a massive collection of documents of national (as against local) interest from 1066. For the family historian there are Army, Navy, Marines, Merchant Navy, Police, Railway, Criminal, Immigration, Emigration, Legal and Taxation records.
14. Family History Societies are mostly county based and publish magazines giving information about the history of the area. They also make it possible to contact other people with similar surname interests. It is helpful to join the society that deals with the area where your ancestors lived.
15. The Internet. Some websites are listed (above)

Addresses of County Record Offices, Mormon Family History Centres and Family History Societies and telephone numbers of other repositories may be found in the latest Edition of 'The Family and Local History Handbook' (see booklist)

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