

BASICS

Section Introduction

Researching your ancestors is perhaps the most exciting journey you take. It's a detective story, with you in the lead role, solving clues and encountering real people from the past who lived through the history we read about in school, or have seen on television.

Perhaps you've seen an episode of *Who Do You Think You Are*, or *Find My Past*. Doesn't it look easy? I'm afraid to say, the reality is a little harder.

- There's no brown envelope, stored at an archive, which will contain all the documents you need inside to build your family tree.
- You can't just wander into a record office, pick a document off the shelves, open it at random and find your ancestor – though I've known people to whom this has actually happened!
- Perhaps most frustratingly of all, you will encounter brick walls, dead ends, red herrings and elusive relatives who seem to disappear without trace, or pop into existence as though immaculately conceived.

This, though, is half the fun; and you will need to do plenty of digging to get the best results, especially the further back in time you go. People often say that they were 'lucky' to find a key document. However in my experience, and to paraphrase the great golfer Arnold Palmer, the more you research the luckier you get!

Let's start by dispelling some of the myths about family history.

First, anyone can trace their ancestors; it's not just a pursuit for retired people who've reached the top of the family tree. The key word is family, and many children from 7 upwards are investigating their roots, along with a younger generation who want to find out more about their identity and culture.

Second, it's not just about collecting thousands of names on a family tree – it's about finding out who you are, who you're related to, and what their lives were like. In short, you'll be stepping back in time and learning about an unwritten history, seen through your ancestors' eyes.

Third, you don't need a PhD or degree to get started. Anyone can do it. Some of the best historians I've met are self-taught genealogists without an academic qualification (my own PhD is in 13th century state finance and fiscal history; my first piece of genealogy was for *Who Do You Think You Are*). Nowadays, universities are realising and appreciating the value of the work and skills of the family history community because we explore a wide range of sources across a vast span of time.

Fourth, the Internet has transformed the way we research, with indexes, digital images, datasets and family trees appearing online for us to view – often for free, sometimes for a limited cost. This is truly democratic history, with access to our historic records open to all.

Finally, family history is not just about people. I prefer the phrase personal heritage, as you'll need to research the places where your ancestors lived (house history), the communities they were part of (local history), the work they undertook (social history), the wars that shaped their lives (military history), and the chronological framework of national and international history as you move back in time.

As you've probably seen on television, the results may be shocking, moving, inspirational, aspirational and surprising – but these are real people, and these are your family.

Are you ready? You will be amazed by what you find.

Good. Then it's time to set out on your exciting adventure.

About this section

This section is written with the beginner in mind (though I daresay there are many genealogists who should read on anyway!)

The guide will take you through the basic steps, showing you how to assemble information about your family from scratch; go looking for clues; put all the information together in your first family tree; work out what you want to research first; and how to find help in your quest.

First Steps

It's easy on TV...

You've watched an episode of 'Who Do You Think You Are'. The show is an emotional rollercoaster, and the celebrity uncovered amazing information about their ancestor with apparent ease. Inspired by the journey, you're tempted to jump online, just like the celebrity did during the programme, to see what you can find out about yourself.

Don't.

If you start looking online without planning your research, having first worked out exactly who you're looking for and why, you can quickly become lost, confused, frustrated and poorer than when you started (given many of the websites that entice you to sign up will charge you access to their records).

Why do you want to do this?

First, ask yourself why you want to do this. Family history can be exciting, amazing, and inspirational – but will require time, money, dedication and hard work; and you will encounter plenty of difficulties with missing ancestors, lack of records, research trails that run dry.

Everybody has a different reason for starting out on this exciting journey. It may be because you want to find out the truth behind a long-standing family myth; or you're curious about your cultural background, and want to explore whether any of your characteristics or traits (particularly 'inherited' skills such as music, art, dance for example) come from a particular side of the family; perhaps you want to pass on stories you've heard from your own parents and grandparents to a younger generation, now you're at the top of your family tree. Some people have even looked into their roots because they've believed they have no family, and discovered hundreds of relatives out there. It certainly can help expand the Christmas card list.

Be careful...

All I'd say at this stage is that whatever your motivation for starting, you will enjoy it – but there's no turning back. Once you've discovered information about your past, you can't ignore it. There are serious implications – many people have discovered that they, or their parents, were illegitimate or adopted, and revelations such as this can change the way you view your family forever.

However, these are extreme examples, and you're bound to encounter a colourful character or two along the way. Providing they are sufficiently far back in time, they can often provide stories to dine out on! Celebrities have been turned down by 'Who Do You Think You Are' on the grounds that their ancestors were 'too boring'. Personally, I find this nonsense as all our ancestors can be interesting, provided you look at the social history that surrounded their lives.

Now, grab an old fashioned pen and paper, and write down a few basics things.

Interview yourself

This is your research journey, so start by writing down as much information about yourself and your family. This will become a family heirloom that future generations will treasure, and you are about to become the archivist, chronicler and publicist for people you may never meet. They'll want to know who you are. Perhaps start by sketching out your reasons for tracing your ancestors.

Now it's time to start compiling biographical information about your family. It's traditional to work back in time, so note down the names of your parents (including middle names or any nicknames and former that might have been used in the past); plus dates of birth, marriage and death.

You should focus on where some of these events took place, because geography will be an important feature of your work – particularly further back in time, or if you're dealing with people with common surnames (Smith, Jones, Williams).

You can also begin to draw up a profile for them – where they went to school, their careers and places of work, hobbies, pastimes, interests, friends...

The next step is to repeat this for previous generations as well – grandparents, great-grandparents... How far back can you go, and accurately record all the above information from memory? It's actually quite tricky! If you're not sure of something, put a question mark next to it – this will help you when come to put your research trail together.

It will be particularly important to start working out which branch of the family most fascinates you, and whether there's a particular story you want to pursue. Don't forget to note where they lived or if they travelled around...

Finally, you should include siblings – your brothers and sisters, your uncles and aunts, and other relatives further up the family tree. Don't worry if you don't know that many – your research will quickly reveal how many people share your lineage, if that's something you want to do.

SUMMING UP

- What do you want to find out about your family?
- Write down what you know about your immediate family
- Focus on biographical data
- Include geographical information
- Note any stories you want to investigate
- Work as far back as you can, noting things you are unsure of
- Include information where possible on siblings of direct relatives

NEXT STEPS

Having written down all you know about yourself, you need to interview other relatives.

Talk To Your Family

If at all possible, you should talk to your family – especially relatives who are older than you are and can remember their parents and grandparents (people that perhaps you've never met).

Of course, you may not be able to do this, if you are the oldest surviving generation in your family or don't have any siblings with whom to share memories.

This doesn't mean you can't trace your family's history. You'll just need to skip to the next step.

However, if you do have people to talk to – even if it's an old family friend – you will find it a rewarding and enriching process, as long as you follow these simple tips on interviewing people.

Just don't leave it too late. Memories fade over time, and many people regret not taking the opportunity to talk to a loved one about a family story; it's often when they're gone that we realise we didn't record the tales we thought they'd always be around to tell.

Choosing the right moment

There are certain events that bring families together – celebrations such as birthdays, christenings, marriages; events in the calendar such as Christmas or Easter; and sadder occasions like a funeral, where (ironically) you often get the most genealogical information shared during conversations as people work out how they are related to one another, and swap stories about the deceased.

Nostalgia is the key to unlocking memories (a good dose of alcohol often works wonders at Christmas as well, when auntie becomes more animated after a stiff sherry and talks about the past).

You can wait for one of these natural events if you like, or perhaps stage your own family reunion. It's even possible to involve your relatives in memory games, and make the process of gathering clues quite fun – using group photos to see how many people your family can name, or who can tell the funniest story.

However, you are likely to get the most detailed information from a series of one-on-one interviews, so perhaps use a family gathering to announce your grand adventure, and then sign everyone up to a series of subsequent conversations at a time and location that's convenient for them.

That will also give you time to prepare your questions, and work out how to record the interviews.

What questions you should ask – and how to ask them!

You should try to prepare a list of questions in advance, and rehearse them if possible so you don't sound like you're conducting an interrogation. You will need to put your relatives at ease; even the most familiar family member might find the process uncomfortable at first.

Your questions fall into two main types – ones that generate biographical information, and those that allow your relative to tell a story.

For the biographical questions, as before you'll need to focus on names, dates, events, locations and other clues such as occupation:

- Can you tell me when, and where, you were born?
- What were the names of your parents?
- Where did they get married?

It might even be easier to send these questions to your relative in advance of your visit, rather than grill them on information they might not have readily to hand.

Instead, during the interview you should always encourage your relative to tell stories about themselves, and their ancestors. Anecdotes are great fun to tell as well as to hear, and can take some time to narrate.

However, it's worth persevering as even the most innocuous of conversations can reveal interesting snippets of information that become hugely important as your research progresses.

The way to do this is to structure your questions, leading your subject into a conversation rather than setting up a yes or no answer. Also, try to focus on key dates or events that will trigger a memory – things that perhaps you also have in common:

- Tell me about your first day of school – what was it like?
- I bet you can remember all about your wedding day!
- Can you describe what your father did for a living?

It can really help to have some memory prompts to hand as well – a photo album, for example, so you can talk about some of the people you want to investigate; or letters, postcards, journals or diaries that can start a conversation. Even old newspapers, or a piece of music, can spark a nostalgic conversation.

Recording the process

You should always take good notes when you interview someone, linked to the questions you've prepared in advance.

However, modern technology allows us to do something even more amazing – to record the interview so that you capture the sound of your relative's voice, and an image of them telling the story.

This interview could become a treasured family heirloom for future generations.

Please, though, ensure you've got the permission of your interviewee before you start recording them, and that they're comfortable with the technology.

Some people can be quite put off by the thought that they're being recorded, or might not want to talk about particular subjects. You can always stop taping the interview at this point – so everything is 'off the record', so to speak.

You should perhaps also think of creating your own personal video diary of your experiences. A rather thoughtless critic described family history as self-indulgent naval gazing when *Who Do You Think You Are* first came out.

In fact, recording your thoughts and research for posterity ensures that fragile oral history is captured and preserved for future generations to enjoy, creating a living link between past, present and future.

Tricky areas

There may be other reasons why people don't want to talk about their past – illegitimacy, a family secret, or their role in armed conflict for example. No matter how curious you may be about this, you have to respect the privacy of your relative. After all, this may be an issue that's affected them all their life.

There are ways to research 'areas of silence' within a family – there's usually someone who'll talk – but you should also think about whether you want to. After all, it could cause tremendous upset if you went poking around someone's background if they've made it clear they don't want to you.

Instead, try another tack. Ask them to perhaps write down an account of what happened, and then seal it in an envelope. Their story can then be 'bequeathed' to the family after they're dead.

Alternatively, you could take them to see an expert. It's often easier to empathise with someone who appears to know what you've been through, especially if it relates to what happened during a war that you've never talked to family about, or secrets are concerned.

Following up

You should find that you've collected a lot of information once you've exhausted your store of relatives to talk to (if not their patience!)

One of the next jobs will be to extract all this information so you can start building your family tree, and investigating key ancestors. However...

Don't forget the following pitfalls when recording oral history:

- Memory can play tricks over time – not everything you hear may be completely accurate
- Try to corroborate as many versions of a story as you can. Where the accounts overlap or agree, there's more chance of accuracy
- Look out for erroneous dates – your job will be to check that all this information is correct, so never taken this data for granted
- You should also keep an eye out for nicknames. People were often called by their middle names, or given 'pet' names, which can often cause confusion when trying to verify information
- Likewise, non-relatives may also be given affectionate titles such as uncle or aunt, particularly if they are god parents. You may have to prune your family tree a bit!

SUMMING UP

- Tell everyone what you're doing
- Set up a series of interviews
- Prepare your questions carefully
- Send biographical questions in advance
- Record the interviews (with permission)
- Steer clear of sensitive areas
- Assess the information you've gathered

NEXT STEPS

Having talked to your family, you need to hunt for physical clues...