

Brick Wall (research blocks) advice

Many family history researchers will encounter a 'brick wall' in their research at some point, but how many are true brick walls and how many are just pit stops due to poor research skills or records that are not online?

So how do you knock down your 'brick walls'?

1. Re-examine everything

The first step in overcoming a brick-wall is to re-examine how you got to this point in your research.

Write down all of the information you have in a timescale format and decide what extra information you want or need. By organising data by time, you may get some ideas of where the information may be located.

2. Try different spellings / ages

This may seem obvious, but it should still be one of your first go-to techniques for finding someone who is 'missing' from records.

If you are having difficulty in locating someone try name variations. Be creative; think of how a name could be spelled phonetically. In the case of the census it would have been taken down by an enumerator and therefore reliant upon their interpretation of what they heard. Try different vowels and any obvious possible alternate methods of spelling, search using known middle names or even nicknames.

In the same way that a name you have may be noted slightly differently in the records, an age can also be a source of difficulty.

An ancestor may have deliberately altered their age at one time or another, for many reasons. Perhaps they needed to be older to enlist in the military or to gain employment, maybe they were marrying someone much older (or younger) than themselves and wanted to reduce the margin. Misinformation stated in one record has a habit of creating a knock-on effect, making the job of locating them harder.

3. Search collateral lines / other family members

Researching other lines of your family tree; the siblings of ancestors and other wider family, is not only an equally valid and vital part of one's family history, but also a good way of finding answers to problems on your direct line. Collateral kin, as these ancestors are known, may be the key to unlocking the secrets of your more immediate relatives.

Was your ancestor staying with or visiting another member of the family in a different part of the country? Sometimes a woman may have given birth or baptised her first child at her parents' home. That still happens today.

4. Have you searched all available sources (and updates to ones you have)

Often a brick wall can be overcome by broadening your search. The first step is to try to locate all possible records for the person, try to find them in every relevant census, birth, marriage and death records. Make sure that you obtain the documents as proof. Double-checking and cross-checking details such as the name, age and place of birth are essential when you encounter difficulty.

Look at the growing range of online resources – don't just use one website. How often do we hear that someone has looked on Ancestry and can't find it...there are lots of other websites to look at and use the local archive office – they have huge amounts of documents and the expertise to help you.

If you have exhausted all of the core records, it is time to branch out and investigate the many millions of other records available. Look at occupations, directories, parish registers, military roll calls and lists. A dead end doesn't mean the end of your research, simply that you will have to try another approach.

- Passenger Lists: perhaps the reason that you cannot find a death entry for a person is that they moved away to start a new life overseas.
- Army service records can hold information regarding the man's parents, siblings, wife and children.
- Wills are relatively cheap and easy to access now. These will often give you lots of family information, including details of the 'black sheep'.
- Newspapers are an undervalued resource that can give family details, addresses, occupations as well as character traits.
- Look at the original parish registers not just the indexes, as the clerk may have made some observations regarding your ancestor that the transcriber did not note down.

Always note your sources, whether it's a book, relative or online source. Note the library, website or record office that you found it in. This will allow you to go back over what you have found, double-check and confirm that you have interpreted all of the information correctly.

5. Help is at hand

Sometimes fresh eyes may see something you missed, discuss it with other members of your family history group...

But there will be times when you need to accept the possibility that a solution may never be found!

Sources: *Society of Genealogists, Find my Past, Who Do You Think You Are magazine and various family history forums*

Attributed to **Peter Roberts, Madeley & District U3A Family History Group**

