

EVERYONE HAS ROOTS

No. 1 - "It starts with you"

So, you want to begin researching your family history? Everyone has roots irrespective of their background and origin. So, why pursue your family history? It can be simple curiosity; a fascination with the past; a sense of history; or the need to discover the skeleton which everyone knows about in your family but never really mentions. Many people begin because they find some information on the death of a loved one and want to investigate further. Whatever your reason to start here are some suggestions:

GENEALOGY OR FAMILY HISTORY?

Genealogy is the study of the history of the past and present members of a family or families undertaken because of an avid interest in their personal and family origins. As a hobby it becomes a pleasantly absorbing pastime, it can become a compulsive quest, but in any case, it is a very satisfying hobby.

Just collecting names and dates is however a sterile pastime which can become mundane and sometimes meaningless. You should aim to understand about the lives your ancestors led and the locations and periods in which they lived. It is important to quickly transition from genealogy to study family history but to do family history you will need to undertake genealogical research.

Family History on the other hand, relates to biographical research into one's ancestors - the aim being to build a contemporary picture of an ancestors' life perhaps producing a well-documented narrative history hopefully of interest to family members and perhaps future generations. The study of family history involves putting flesh on the skeleton that is produced by genealogy and involves the study of the social circumstances and geographical situation in which ancestors lived.

If you are a beginner you are recommended to start to build your basic knowledge of genealogy. There are many useful family history periodicals and organisations which provide the knowhow about how to get started.

However, sometimes you may need to have research undertaken professionally if you are unfamiliar with a set of records or if you live too far away from a record office which makes travel impractical.

JOIN A FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY

It is important to join your local family history society and perhaps the societies in locations where your research is concentrated. The societies undertake valuable work such as indexing and digitisation to help preserve and make readily available the historical records. They also hold regular meetings with guest speakers who impart knowledge on a particular topic. They also produce very useful journals and directories listing their members' research interests so you may find others researching the same ancestors.

If you live within convenient distance of one of the Family History Centres ran by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints it is worth a visit to find out what facilities and local information resources they have. All of the centres provide free access to most

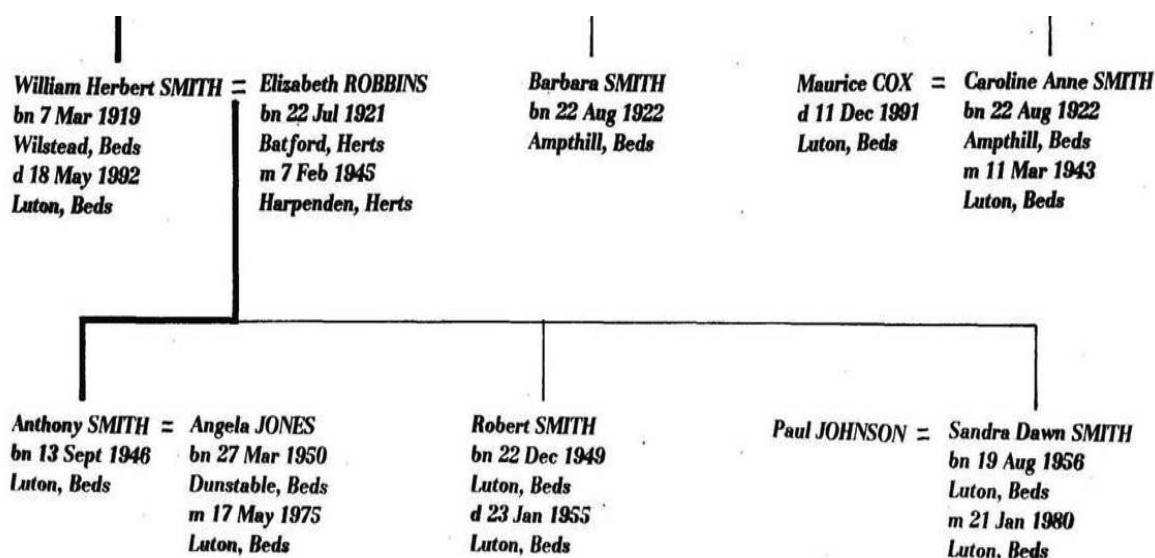
subscription websites. They are all staffed by volunteers and hours of opening will vary and should be published locally. The volunteers are unable to do your research for you, but you will find them a mine of useful information and advice.

Researching your family history is a life-enhancing experience as you discover your ancestors and learn about their character and lives. Beginning your research is a very straightforward process. Researching your family history is also a methodical process.

There is no right or wrong way but there are certain principles that you should follow: prove each link before you move to another event, don't rely on guesswork or conjecture and if necessary, seek advice from experienced researchers. However, the process starts with you.

IT STARTS WITH YOU!

Write down what you already know about you and your family. Take a pencil and blank sheet of paper and build a family tree diagram – we will explain how you can easily do this. Take a blank sheet of paper and turn it to landscape then write your name and date of birth at the bottom of the page, with your siblings in age order, eldest on the left, either side and draw a vertical line up to your parents' names, adding any significant dates such as births/baptisms, marriages, deaths/burials. Continue back as far as you can. This way you'll be able to see how much information you actually know and identify where the gaps are. It is always best to work back in time from known information about already-identified ancestors.



LOCATE FAMILY MEMENTOES / ARCHIVE

Gather any family documents and photographs you have or which may be with your relatives. These often provide precise dates and places for events like family member births, marriages and deaths, and can help you to start filling in some of the missing information on your tree. You might find unique original documents and photos within the family, but unfortunately you will find many photographs which are not titled and therefore you may not be able to establish who is pictured. As you talk with your relatives you will

probably be able to locate other ephemera such as letters, a family bible, legal documents, diaries, school reports, certificates, newspaper cuttings, medals etc.

Being a custodian of a family archive means that you have a responsibility to care for and preserve as much of it as you can. The common enemies of any archive are sunlight, air pollution, damp, heat and vermin. Store your archive correctly. For a small additional cost, it is worth investing in archive quality storage materials such as polyester folders and sleeves rather than buying a pack of polythene type sleeves from a commercial stationer. Use Acid free boxes and photo albums and make sure all your storage is Lignin, Sulphur and Acid free. Specialist firms sell the materials at family history fairs but most materials can also be accessed on-line. Make use of digital storage as much as you can but then you have a responsibility to keep the medium up to date.

For medium term preservation of paper you can consider laminating but don't laminate parchment.

Arthur John Mitchell Married at
Elizabeth Hannah Copeland St Matthew
Merton Surrey 11th April 1887
Children
Florence Mabel Mitchell born
50th March 1888 210 Mount-Pleasant-
Liverpool 1/4 to one (died 6 Jan 1898 at 7 Haavel
mans Street Manchester)
James White Mitchell born 16 parson
age Sheeh Raddington Liverpool 22nd
March 1889 died 14th April 1889

TALK TO FAMILY MEMBERS

Family members can inform you about the character traits of some of your ancestors and may have documents and photographs you've never seen before. It is essential to keep notes on all your conversations. As you progress in your research you might be reminded of something significant in those initial notes that you didn't consider important when you first spoke. It is always good to keep talking with your relations as your research progresses, feeding back information you have found out. This may jog their memories and could result in them divulging additional information.

Start by talking with and writing to all your relations with your questions. It is a known fact that females can recall more than males when talking about their relatives. Be sensitive and don't push for information they do not want to reveal as doing so may close the door.

Unfortunately, many people begin tracing their families when parents or grandparents have died and taken memories with them to the grave. In any case don't procrastinate in contacting those who are still alive. You should ask what documents (certificates, letters, newspaper cuttings, family bibles, photograph albums, diaries, etc.) they may possess and if they are willing to share these with you. Try to establish as carefully and completely as possible the basic genealogical facts, date and place of birth/baptism, date and place of marriage, and date and place of death/burial of as many of your relatives as you can.

You will doubtless be informed of family legends. Do not ignore them but do not take them as being literally true. Use them as another source of guidance in your pursuit of finding out about the past.

If you have the equipment, record your family members as you interview them. Remember however to ask their permission before doing so as some people may be self-conscious or not like the idea. Oral histories form a valuable part of any family archive. By recording an interview this will allow you to capture accents and emotions as they respond to your questions. For some family historians having their ancestors recorded on tape is also an invaluable record. The only drawback is that you need to keep pace with technology and update the recording medium as needed.

Before you begin your interview build a checklist of items you wish to discuss with a relative. Be first to tell them what you already know about the subject relative, no matter how much or how little that is. It will act as a prompt to the interviewee. Don't be surprised if people don't remember the detail but there is usually some element which will lead you to continued research. You can build a lively discussion by asking questions about schools attended and which family members went to the same school, who served in the military, where did they go on holiday etc. Just try and build up a life picture because you will frequently learn what they looked like, any nicknames or aliases they used, what they did for a living, whether they served in the wars, any conflicting tales and obtain an idea of dates of events in their lives. Older relations if they are still living may remember people who were alive a century ago.

DEVELOP A PLAN OF ACTION

While you're collecting together your information you should begin to think about what you would like to find out about each ancestor. This is a vitally important action as it will form a framework around which you can plan your research.

Think about whether you want to follow your paternal or maternal lines or both. You have two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and so on. You have to draw the line somewhere. You can use your research time wisely if you make a decision before you actually begin researching.

Some researchers aim to produce a "Family Tree" - showing only their male-line ancestors (father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etc.) with the wives, and siblings of these ancestors. Some want to produce an "Extended Family Tree" which shows all the collateral lines of a

family. An extended family tree will include many of your distant cousins who may also be researching your family tree through common connections. If you are ambitious you may attempt to trace as many direct ancestors through both male and female lines, and so produce an "Ancestry Chart".

However, whatever your aim it is prudent to concentrate on a small section of the tree at any one time because otherwise you will become overwhelmed and confused.

COLLABERATE WITH OTHERS

It is virtually guaranteed that you will not be the only person researching your family. You may well have cousins that you did not know existed so think about collaborating with them. This leads to you working together and sharing information that you all find. It may also have the practical effect of spreading the cost of certificates and website subscriptions.

Check the various online regional surname lists to see whether anyone else is already researching any of your family lines. All the popular websites include genealogies and family trees submitted by other researchers. Your ancestry could be recorded in published genealogies and books of pedigrees. However, don't make the mistake of taking any of these as "gospel". Take any information you find as potentially valuable information whose accuracy you have to confirm carefully before you adopt it. Use it as a basis for additional research. Unfortunately, there are many false and grossly inaccurate family trees appearing on the internet, even on supposedly reputable websites.

ORGANISE YOUR RECORD KEEPING

One essential element of family history is the need to maintain well-organised notes. As you progress with your research you will gather information on new people and events. Regularly updated records of each step you've taken will save you duplicating searches. You will also need to think about what computer software you need to preserve your research. There are many reasonably priced specialist genealogy software packages designed to enable you to store your family history details and build trees including RootsMagic, Family Tree Maker and Family Historian.

To avoid any misinformation and possible future research duplication it is vital that you document your sources i.e. where you found your information. You may need to review your research again and again, perhaps to clarify any conflicting information you may find or someone may want to verify your research. Don't become one of the people who underestimate, or never consider, the importance of documentation. If you have undertaken research and discovered information that applies to your ancestry, you must keep source reference information in case you need to revisit the document years later for clarification purposes. If you publish, or share with others, the results of your research, cite the exact sources that you used and on whose accuracy you have relied.

Use a digital camera to photograph the document or at least obtain a photocopy of the important records you find. You can also easily download images from websites and store them electronically alongside your pedigrees. Most software programmes allow you to add media to a family or individual and to appropriately tag the image with a citation as a point of reference. You may have to pay a small fee to use a camera in a record office but it is often cheaper than paying for a photocopy of every document you need. Some libraries and

archives may impose restrictions on copying so if you've kept a good and complete record you can do without a photocopy in some cases. Make sure you record everything in a document such as margin notes, witness names etc.

Keep a careful research log detailing the searches you have made even if you found nothing. Negative searches are positive as they enable you to eliminate. Such a record will save you from searching the same record or source again in the future. Sometimes you need to use "negative proof" in order to convince yourself that, because of the absence of evidence to the contrary, a particular supposition can be taken to be correct.

Having thought about a record keeping process let's consider the workings of an action plan.

Devise a simple system to keep your records orderly.

Set a research goal at every stage of your research to avoid being side-tracked.

Regard names, dates and places as prime factors.

Record all the information in a document – it may be useful in providing clues in the future.

Remember county boundaries are not physical boundaries – people moved across borders.

Keep a working pedigree during your research – it is your picture of progress.

Don't give up if you find nothing – negative searches can be positive.

Don't trust information to memory.

Don't believe everything written in an official document – it is only as good as given by the informant.

Don't assume spelling is the same today as it was in the past.

Don't go to the record office until you have exhausted all possible enquiries at home and with relations.

Beware of the information available on the Internet, some of it is blatantly false.

VISIT A FAMILY HISTORY FAIR

There are a network of family history fairs and shows which take place annually around the country. These are great places to attend talks on research protocol, visit with and talk to likeminded people who exhibit as family history societies, specialist organisations and the commercial concerns who run the major genealogy websites.

Family history societies hold open days which, by their nature, are more localised but where you can usually access locally held databases of vital events such as baptism or burials. Irrespective of which type of event you visit there is a wealth of information available in the form of instructional books, database collections, pedigree charts etc which will help with beginning your research.

Most events are well publicised in libraries, specialist magazines and even in the local press.

SUBSCRIBE TO SPECIALIST MAGAZINES

Like most hobbies there are specialist publications readily available in newsagents which relate to family history and which keep all their readers up to date on news and events which affect family history.

They are great for keeping the reader up to date with new database information becoming available of the various websites, advising of changes to procedures for such things as purchasing certificates, opening hours of archives etc. Above all, they carry a variety of very well illustrated articles on a wide range of topics relating to family history. Most also feature an informative Question and Answer section outlining research techniques when people get stuck. In the UK the most popular monthly magazines are Family Tree, Who Do You Think You Are and Your Family Tree.

You should also subscribe (for free) to online newsletters such as Lost Cousins and Eastman Online Genealogy Newsletter as these too provide topical and useful information.

WHERE NOW?

Now that you have got yourselves organised you can progress further and begin the research. The following guides are available to help you gain an understanding of how to research and what you can discover about your ancestors.

EVERYONE HAS ROOTS (a series of helpful research guides)

No. 1 It starts with you

No. 2 Ready to begin your research

No. 3 Birth, marriage & death certificates

No. 4 Grow your tree with census returns

No. 5 Baptism, marriage & burial registers

No. 6 Records created after death

No. 7 Discovering more about your ancestors

No. 8 The military connection

No. 9 Tracing your ancestors when they moved

No. 10 Proving your research is correct