

# EVERYONE HAS ROOTS

## No. 2 - “Ready to begin your research”

Now that you have organised yourself and found out what your relations know and have in documentary evidence you are now ready to begin the journey into research.

### **CONFIRMING YOU HAVE THE CORRECT PERSON**

Many novice family historians make the mistake of tracing the wrong family lines. To minimise the likelihood of this happening you need to ask yourself certain questions:

Is the surname correct? Did the surname of a child change on a subsequent marriage of the mother?

Could they be known by a nickname? Many are known by a different name throughout their lives than the one they were registered at birth with.

Was there a change of name? Beside the name change at marriage was there an alias etc?

To which social class did my ancestor belong? Researching records for an agricultural labourer will be different to those of a lawyer or doctor.

### **BEGIN YOUR RESEARCH ON-LINE**

People will tell you that you can do all your family history using the internet and indeed this is partially correct. There are many genealogy database sites on the internet – some requiring a subscription and others free of charge. Determine which websites will best suit your research and provide the best information for your money.

Various commercial companies and many archives have digitised millions of family history records and continue to do so. The number of websites can seem a bit overwhelming at first but don't let that put you off.

Don't rush into subscribing until you see what is available free of charge first. The free websites include FamilySearch.org and sites like FreeBMD for the birth, marriage and death certificate information – you will still have to purchase the actual certificates, FreeCEN for the census returns and FreePAR for parish registers. Although some of the free sites may not have complete records you may not need a subscription in the early stages of your research (back to c1840) or until you've really got absorbed into your research. By then you should have a clear idea of which subscription site or sites you need. But even then, many local libraries, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday saints family history centres and record offices allow access to Ancestry or even FindMyPast in many cases free of charge or for a small hourly fee in some libraries.

If you want to, or need to venture further afield, the National Archives in Kew and National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth allow visitors to use most genealogy websites free of charge when visiting. Also, take advantage of 'try before you buy'. Subscription websites often have free trial memberships for newcomers usually for

14 days, but remember to cancel your payment commitment before the end of the trial period if you're not ready to commit or the site does not meet your immediate needs, otherwise your subscription will be activated.

Ancestry, Findmypast, MyHeritage, Geneanet and The Genealogist are the major commercial subscription sites for tracing English and Welsh ancestors, and for accessing additional British and overseas records. They all offer the GRO birth, marriage and death indexes back to 1837 and censuses from 1841 to 1911 - the essential datasets that form the backbone of genealogical research, but then so do free sites.

Although these major subscription sites all offer the GRO indexes and Census returns, they also hold a huge range of other sources, some of which are unique to a particular site that won't be found on any of the others. Remember they are competing for datasets.

So, before you consider taking out a subscription, it is worth taking some time to investigate the websites that will be most useful to you.

See whether the websites cover your region of research. Check to see which websites have agreements with which local archives to host their data. For example, if your family mostly comes from London, Liverpool, Surrey or West Yorkshire then you should consider Ancestry, but if your family came from Wales, Westminster, Cheshire or Hertfordshire then FindMyPast might be more applicable.

Check the unique collections each site hosts as there may be other records of interest to you. For example, The Genealogist has Tithe maps and apportionments, FindMyPast has a vast collection of national and provincial newspapers and Ancestry has the National Probate (Wills) and Divorce Calendars/records. Both Ancestry and FindMyPast have vast collections of military and navy records and you will come across these in your research as late as the First World War.

Give each site a test drive. When testing, look for a range of ancestors on the census returns and see which search process suits you best, returns the best results and is easy for you to understand. You will inevitably refer to the census returns very frequently and each of the sites allow searches in a different way.

Most sites offer a family tree builder so check out the tree-building capability. Again, before subscribing consider whether you can move your tree away from that site if you change allegiance. While you can usually export a tree and put it elsewhere, in reality you may find that the site you start building your tree on is the site you stick with, so choose wisely! If you use a tablet or smartphone find out if you are able to access your tree on those mobile devices. Can other family members look at your tree? What are the privacy options? Are you able to connect with other people who share ancestors on your family tree?

Don't limit yourself. While you may have your tree saved in one place, don't feel you have to stick with a single subscription site. Although you may be offered generous loyalty discounts, it can really pay to try a different site for a year and get access to a different set of records. Keep your eyes peeled for new data becoming available and

for special subscription discount offers. Subscribe to website newsletters such as FindMyPast Friday.

### DO NOT RELY ONLY ON ONLINE SOURCES

Although online sources are growing all the time, for the foreseeable future, it is extremely likely that some of the information you will need to research will only be possible by referring to original records, books, files or microform which are only available in national and local record offices, archives and such facilities as the Society of Genealogists Library.

There are a huge number of original records which enhance the experience of family history research and are waiting to be used including parish chest records, manor court records, taxation records, probate records, militia muster rolls, military service records, tithe maps and electoral rolls. You will become familiar with these as you build your knowledge of what is available and see how much useful information can be obtained from them. None of these were generated specifically for the use of family historians and their interpretation may not always be straightforward. On average, an ancestor generated around 100 records during their lifetime, so you will need to familiarise yourself with the various records one at a time, as your need arises. Research will then become a series of fascinating opportunities, rather than a forbidding challenge.

### READING OLD-STYLE HANDWRITING

For many who are less experienced, one of the main challenges to research, even in documents as late as the 20th century, is being able to read old handwriting and understand some of the terminology that was used at the time. In England we were generally taught to write using a style of cursive hand primarily using rounded letters. In the last century and earlier there were various styles used depending on the education of the scribe and also the type of document being researched.

<i>Set Chancery.</i>		<i>Common Chancery.</i>		<i>Court Hand</i>		<i>Secretary (Stuart Period)</i>	
A	a	A	a	A	a	A	a
B	b	B	b	B	b	B	b
C	c	C	c	C	c	C	c
D	d	D	d	D	d	D	d
E	e	E	e	E	e	E	e
f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
G	g	G	g	G	g	G	g
H	h	H	h	H	h	H	h
I	i	I	i	I	i	I	i
K	k	K	k	K	k	K	k
L	l	L	l	L	l	L	l
M	m	M	m	M	m	M	m
N	n	N	n	N	n	N	n

The more experienced you become at research the more familiar you will be at reading the writing. Don't be afraid to ask for help but try and identify recognisable words in a document, build an alphabet and then begin the jig-saw. Names, dates and places are of paramount importance. Wrongly interpreting a name can lead even the most seasoned research astray.

If you follow these guidelines you should be able to find information in most documents:

read through the whole document even if you do not understand it.

extract the words you are able to read.

if you have a photocopy of the document use a highlighter pen on the words which are unclear.

to recognise more difficult letters and words compare them with the words you can read.

consider the context rather than spelling out the word.

build up your own alphabet of upper and lower case letters (you will be surprised how many letters you can obtain from words like, and, but, to, item, when etc).

The National Archives have on their website an interactive tutorial which you may find useful for technique and experience.

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/>

## **PREPARING TO VISIT A LOCAL ARCHIVE**

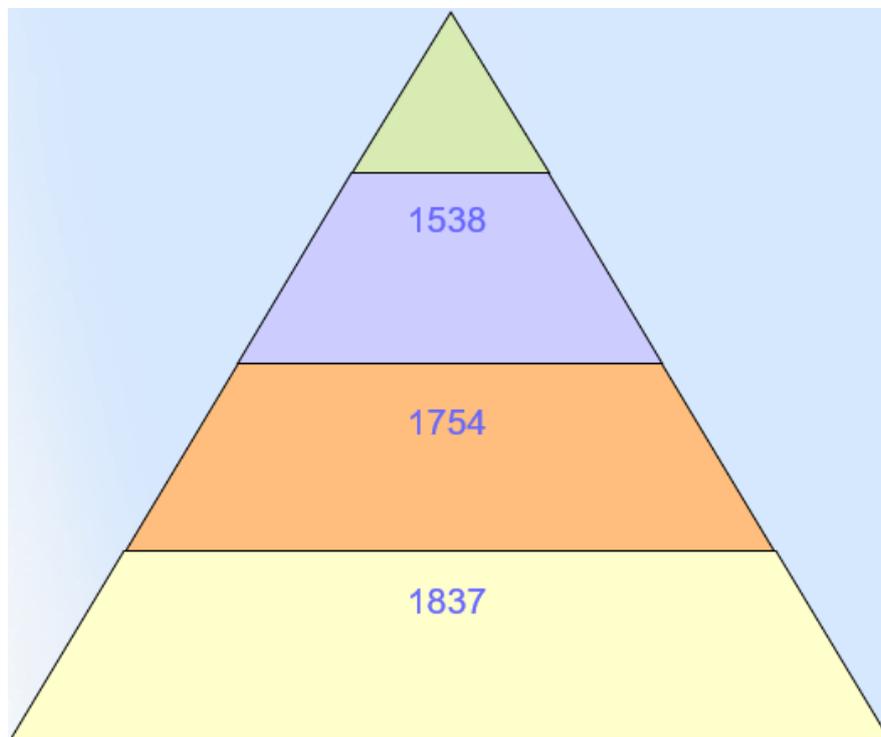
Fairly early on in your research you will need to take yourself off to a record office in the area that your ancestors originated. Most archives are organised on a county basis so it is important to know that you will be in the right place for some productive research.

There are some simple steps to prepare for a visit:

1. Fully review your known information and set a goal for what you wish to achieve. If you do this your research will be productive and you won't get side-tracked.
2. Check the online catalogues for the records to make sure the documents you need are actually deposited. There is nothing more demoralising than arriving at a venue to realise they do not have the record or that it is stored offsite and will take a couple of days to be retrieved.
3. If this is your first visit to an archive make sure you take identification for a reader's ticket. Usually a driving licence or passport and a utility bill will suffice but check the record office website for requirements. You may even be able to register online for your reader's ticket. Many record offices operate the CARN system so obtaining a readers ticket at one will allow you to visit others without the need to register each time.

4. Put together your “research kit” – your base information and a working pedigree chart, laptop computer or a tablet/ipad etc., a pencil (pens are not allowed in archive reading rooms), some loose change – often lockers take refundable £1 or 20p coins.
5. A digital camera or coins for photocopies. You may be able to purchase an archive copy card.
6. A magnifying glass or sheet. It is often easier to read the handwriting on some documents when it is enlarged.
7. Some people will say you also need a “gag”. Reading rooms are usually quiet places so if you let out an excited yelp when you find something, everyone will turn and look at you!!

### HOW FAR BACK CAN YOU GET?



To some extent this is an unanswerable question because it really depends on what sources of information are available and how resourceful and committed you are in your ancestral pursuit. The British Isles generally has very extensive historical records held in a variety of national and local collections.

In this day and age, it is fairly straightforward to take your ancestry back to the early 1800s using mainly online resources but research does not stop there. You, in theory, should be able to trace families back to the late 1600s or even earlier. This of course depends on your commitment and also the knowledge and experience you gain of the variety of different documents. It also sometimes depends on a degree on luck. Some ancestors were “expert” at avoiding officialdom so may rarely appear in the major documents. Don’t become demoralised but try lateral thinking or moving to a different ancestral line. Doors may then open.

## **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*

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