



Get Into Genealogy and be prepared for some surprises growing on the family tree

Intrigue, secrets, red-herrings and unexpected revelations - they hint at sub-plots in a spy thriller or murder mystery. Actually, these are just a few of the elements that can be encountered when tracing family origins. For anyone who enjoys pitting their wits against the sleuth in a crime story, a foray into the world of genealogy could prove a rewarding alternative. It's not as stuffy as it might sound and there are quite a few already doing it who will testify to that. But if you do decide to start your own investigation, be prepared to have your eyes opened. Your family may have been hiding a dark secret or two which, once uncovered will have you wondering what else you were never told about. Maybe they weren't as straight-laced and ordinary as they hoped people would believe. If status and reputation matter to you, perhaps it would be best to let this sleeping dog lie; but if you wouldn't mind exposing the odd skeleton in the family closet, get ready for a trip back to times when life was not as uncomplicated as history might suggest.

Obviously the place to start is present day. You will probably already have seen a family tree and, at first glance, the design would appear to be quite straight forward. With you at the bottom alongside any brothers and sisters, the line traces up to your parents, then splits into two - three or more if your father married again. The father always carries the bloodline and the family name - sorry, ladies, but that's the way it has been up to now - however, the mother's side is just as pertinent, particularly so where she was from important, influential, or even noble stock. If your main area of interest is the family of your father, or your mother, the tree will be like a main stem or trunk and few if any lateral off-shoots. There could be some sprouting from the outer branches, however, that might bear investigation and to ignore them as irrelevant can result in a sudden halt to the search, as we found during our own investigations. Tracking one member of a family, especially the youngest of the brood, is sometimes only possible by taking into account the relatives, distant or not, with whom they might have been living at a certain time. So, aunts and uncles, in-laws and cousins, no matter how far removed, are clues the genealogy detective must always keep in mind.

As an overview, that suggests a relatively boring trudge through a few old records, but there's more to it than that. Fortunately, there are shortcuts to actual hands-on browsing which may be totally impractical. The most powerful investigative tool at your disposal is the Internet. There are numerous genealogy websites which have gathered information from official sources such as birth, marriage and death registrations, plus national census data. One in particular that we use regularly and have found extremely useful is mentioned at the foot of the web page version of this article. For further information, simply click on the direct link to go straight to their website. As part of their services, each of these sites provide a helpful guide instructing how best to use their facilities. You will find that many will only release information to subscribers, so it will cost you to access their pages; but it is worth the money because they have done the hard work for you. There is, however, a trap in accepting this data as gospel. The information is about people, provided by people, recorded by people, transcribed by people; and everyone is fallible.

Taking a look at some of the original documents, many of which were hand-written, it is understandable how mistakes could be made when transferring entries to a different medium such as a computer database. Someone inputting hundreds, even thousands of these records, can't spare the time to analyse every single word and reads most at a glance. Some errors can be minor and easily recognised - Frog Lane transcribed as Frag Lane. In this instance, it shouldn't be a problem to check, always assuming a street map of the area in question is available. But when it comes to names of individuals, a mistake can send a researcher off on a wild goose chase. Two of the examples we spotted may explain this: the first was obviously wrong - Percival transposed as Ricival; but the second might have gone unnoticed - Isaac input as Jane. As far as was known, there was no Jane in the family, whereas there was an Isaac. Examination of the hand-writing and comparing it to other entries in the original record suggested the 'I' had been read as a 'J' and the rest had been assumed. So, it does pay to be very

particular and not take any information at face value. Wherever possible, findings need to be cross-checked.

It must also be remembered that some names can be spelt in different ways and these variations may have been misread and not transcribed correctly. A classic example is the surname Gardener, the original derivation, one would assume, being attached to a person who tended gardens for a living. Although they sound very similar, the other spellings can confuse searches – Gardner without the 'e', and Gardiner with an 'i'. Add to these the possibility of poor or faint handwriting and even Garner comes into the equation. Be wary of strictly following only those entries spelled in a particular way. When the line of current research does dry up, it may be advisable to consider one or more of the other spellings as a possibility; and have a look at references to them in the various document sources before dismissing them.

A valuable resource of the genealogy detective is people. Those still living who are members of the family, or unrelated individuals who might have known one or more, may provide snippets and anecdotes verifying or refuting specific details of earlier times. This is especially important when factual data is confusing. It might have been assumed that the family being investigated was resident in a particular area during a certain period - records relating to this place seem to confirm it as likely, and the tree should continue on from there. Then an old friend claims that this couldn't be because the Grandfather and his own were, at that same time, both members of a town band many miles away in a different county. Following something like this, records in this other county might be checked to discover there was a family of the correct name living there, as were ten more with the same surname. Perhaps the way to go then would be to compare the given names of children born to each of the possibles with the idea of eliminating the ones which had too few offspring, not enough, or bearing different given names.

Unfortunately, names themselves can be a problem, both given and surnames. Imagine trying to tie down an Evan Williams who was thought to be living somewhere in the Northwest of Wales in 1899. Both names were popular, still are, making the task daunting. When it comes to given names, the reference to any old Tom, Dick, or Harry isn't far wrong; and as for family names - those from the father's side, and the maiden names of the mothers - they are rarely unique. In fact, some seemed to be a prerequisite for breeding like rabbits! Faced with a conundrum of this magnitude, many will be tempted to give up in despair, which is a pity, for here is where the real detective work comes in.

Let me introduce you to the personal side of investigations which TV and Movie cops do all the time, interviewing "persons of interest" along with those who may have seen or heard something. They usually add: "Anything you can remember, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, give me a call." Much of the information acquired is dismissed as irrelevant or unreliable, and this is your brief - to decide what is, or is not, pertinent. To be successful, you must remain aware of human nature and failings. Memories can't always be relied on, particularly from those individuals who like to tell a good story and may have filled in a few blanks with assumptions, or used some poetic licence to spice it up.

Then there are the "quiet" witnesses, wary of divulging information which could bring to light an indiscretion of their own that they would prefer remained buried. In some instances, this tendency is less personal than it is endemic. My wife and her sister hail from the West Country in England, a region well-known for stand-offish inhabitants reluctant to accept strangers into their midst. Even someone born there, but of parents from a different county, are still likely to be regarded as a "foreigner". Interesting, perhaps, but as we were just needing factual data, what the people of the area thought about others seemed irrelevant. Unfortunately, there was another trend that went cap-in-hand with this reserved attitude - West-Country folk are very secretive. Even in this modern age, it is understandable how certain facts might be embarrassing, or thought of as shameful, such as illegitimate births, criminal activities and suchlike; in olden times, family pride and standing mattered more so. Having accepted this, the two sisters were still puzzled by an inconsistency regarding what was best to keep quiet about. Their father had been born out of wedlock and that was freely admitted; yet their mother had told neither of them that she had once been a school teacher - what was so terrible about that? There were also discrepancies of knowledge about uncles and aunts - my wife thought one thing, whereas her sister claimed she had been told something different. Apparently, official documentation would

be needed to prise open some of the family's locked boxes.

As already mentioned, the genealogy websites provide data collated from official records. Not only is this transposed and listed information available, but in many cases, scanned or photographed images of the original documents can be viewed online and need to be examined to verify that they have been copied accurately. With such a mine of diverse data, it is very easy to get trapped into flitting around from one family member to another and become lost in the possible connections, so it is probably safer to keep it simple and, initially anyway, stick close to the main trunk of the tree. Start from a point that is already known and can be confirmed - the name of a grandparent, perhaps; or if facts are scarce, go with the best assumption. Any clue, no matter how small, can be helpful - a date of birth, death, or marriage; school, military and even criminal records; memberships of trade unions, sporting clubs, societies; in fact any documentation that declares a person to have been present in a specific place at a given time. Those old photos and postcards can be handy for this, not to mention letters, diaries, address books and souvenirs. You may even discover, as we have, attempts by deceased relatives to list ancestors and draw up their own family tree.

Census records are a very useful tool and can provide possible leads, as long as the records available for public viewing aren't too old for your needs. Unfortunately, there are rules regarding access to such documents. In the UK, which is where our respective families originated and we are conducting our search, no data is available after the 1911 census. One would assume that the 100-year line was drawn to safeguard the private details of the majority of individuals still living. Apparently, the first census which included names was conducted in 1841. Prior to that, information was fairly basic and concentrated mainly on increases or decreases in the general population, so privacy wasn't an issue. There were earlier censuses, but it is understood that they were of a similar nature and the original documents would most likely have been destroyed after they had served their purpose. To go through this period to when the first "modern" census was ordered in 1801, or even back further, means finding sources - parish records, for instance - that are hard to access, if they still exist. In some cases, electoral rolls may prove useful, but it must be remembered that, even today, not everyone is eligible to vote, and further back in time this privilege was denied to women in general and the majority of the working class.

Assuming you can track relatives back to 1911 and earlier, the census can provide not only the location of particular family members, but is also a guide to relationships and occupations - head (of the household), wife, daughter, coalminer, scholar, domestic servant, and so on. But, once again, be sceptical and inquiring. This information isn't necessarily accurate. These days, forms are sent out to every residence, but what would have been the point in 1861 when a good portion of the population was illiterate? Census Enumerators were assigned to go from house to house, recording the personal details of whoever was present when they called. As these scribes were unpaid, one can imagine their attitude being fairly casual and less than kindly towards the occupants, especially if it was lousy weather when they had to make their rounds. Also, the public they were sent to interview would have been understandably suspicious, and might have kept these curt, "jumped-up" government officials on the doorstep, answering their questions only because they were legally obliged to, and then not always truthfully. For example, I quote the 1841 census which recorded the age of my Great Great Grandfather as 65 when, according to his birth registration, he was actually 68. I doubt it was due to vanity: perhaps retirement at a certain age was mandatory and he conveniently lost three years so that he could keep working.

These are the kind of possibilities which have to be considered. When it comes to putting it down in black and white, expedience and agenda are major influences and can bend the whole truth, sometimes considerably. The 1881 census raised the bar from mildly invasive to disparaging, documenting the health status of individuals. I can't imagine the entries were based on very professional opinions, not when a person could be listed as being blind, deaf, dumb, imbecile, or lunatic! If a member of your family was classified in such an offensive manner, take it with a pinch of salt. Whatever their "diagnosed" medical condition, all that matters to you is that your ancestors appear on the list somewhere.

On occasions the trail will peter out and a person just seems to vanish. Look at all possible reasons why, no matter how unlikely or distasteful. Their disappearance could be a result of

being jailed or transported for a "crime", whether they committed it or not - early justice systems tended to be weighted in favour of the rich and influential, and even some of them fell foul of it. They may have died or been killed and their bodies never found, so their death would not have been registered. Consider those who joined the armed forces to fight for their country – many simply never came back. Perhaps, you think, that couldn't have been the case because they were too young; but lots of youngsters lied about their age to the recruiting officer, so think again. If their last known address was in a port city, this promotes many colourful suppositions, including being press-ganged, or deciding to leave the country under a false name.

Always be prepared to accept that some people might simply not have wished their whereabouts to be known for fear of repercussions, so even if they were included on a census, their entry could be an alias. Or there might be a simple explanation - they were out walking when the census form was filled in and the person supplying the information didn't fully understand the need to include them because they simply weren't present at the time. When a search founders, as it most likely will, this isn't the end, but merely a brief pause to survey alternative lines of enquiry before continuing with the challenge. There's an answer somewhere. Even official records can be inconsistent, what with the physical boundaries of districts changing over time and some of the smaller localities being lumped together as part of a larger area – registrations of events in a tiny village might be consigned to the main town of the region, and not necessarily the closest one. Rather than focussing on specific districts, initially anyway, it is sometimes best to widen the search and start with the shire or county.

If at all possible, a visit to those areas where relatives resided can be educational, sometimes essential. Not only will you "get a feel" for the place where your ancestors once lived, but you can talk to the locals, some of whom may recall useful facts about bygone days. Then, of course, there are the cemeteries. The written word on official documents and their transposed equivalents can contain errors, but carved inscriptions on tombstones are less likely to be inaccurate. You may even come across the grave of a family member you never knew existed. And if you find no new information at all, you can be content in the knowledge that you have paid your respects.

Whether for interest sake, or a specific purpose, delving into family history is only as complex as you want to make it. The ancestral jigsaw has many pieces, some so alike that any one might fit with another - but they don't. Each has its own place and you will have to figure out where that is. It won't be easy. The mists of time do exist and the further back you go, the less clear will be the path to take. Wandering down a few blind alleys, however, is quite entertaining, and even glimpsing the doings of the wrong family can be an enlightenment, a hint of what life was like in those days for them, and your own kin. Then the individuals who were just names way down the family tree are transformed into real people whose lives, loves and memories can become a part of your own. You really do owe it to them. After all, they made it possible for you to be here today.

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